

Waiting for Margot is about friendship, longing, the desert, meaning, and the truth.

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The comments were added some time after the episodes were written.

This book is what it is.

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INTRODUCTION

Episode 1 - "Pilot"

You look at yourself in the mirror as you brush your hair. Same old, same old. An afternoon run, an afternoon shower, now your head's clear enough from work for you to go to the cafe. You dress, and get your bag ready. You're not a three-bag person. Not a bag lady. Just the laptop bag, with a library book in the side pouch.

You're one of the lucky ones in this hellscape wonderland. You can live without a car. You work in your apartment, on the Internet. You get out on the street, and float on, to your favorite cafe, the only cafe, the only possible cafe, Mitzi's.

WAITING FOR MARGOT

by James Banks

MITZI'S CAFE

Mitzi's is not a breakfast cafe, with bottles of ketchup on the table. Nor is it a vanity hangout. Mitzi's has been in the neighborhood and will never die. It's not the kind of place where you feel European. It has board games that people don't tend to play. The thing that makes it your favorite is that they don't play music.

How do cafes stay in business? Lowlifes like you sit there for hours on a single cup of tea. Apparently, they make all their money in the morning, when people get their coffee for work. But Mitzi's isn't open until 10 AM. You will never know how Mitzi's makes its money, and that has something to do with how it will never die.

The baristas at Mitzi's come and go, and you never got in the habit of befriending them anyway. You know their names but don't get too attached. Alicia rings you up and you get some rooibos tea.

Why do you come to the cafe? At the cafe that will never die, the Dice God rolls you a human every time. God speaks to you through this cafe. You take Communion at this cafe, and you will die in this cafe. Not too soon, though, first you will live here.

You've met people here from time to time, and they come and go, rolling in and out of your life. You are casual, in this wonderland hellscape city. You are never going to die, and every day you live in terror of death.

You sit down at your little table and get out your laptop and start to check the Internet.

JULIA: Beth, is that you?

You know your name. Beth.

YOU: Hello, Julia? Is that right?

JULIA: Beth, you know me. Um, what do we know each other from?

YOU: I'm not sure I know you, actually...

JULIA: No, I'm Julia alright.

YOU: Okay. Well, we must know each other from somewhere.

JULIA: Yeah. Huh... well, it'll come to us.

YOU: Are you sure we know each other?

JULIA: Your face looks familiar, and I know your name.

YOU: Yeah, same here. Okay. Well, what were we talking about?

JULIA: Um... probably about construction on Birmingham Street?

YOU: No, it was probably something more mundane than that.

JULIA: Look at how we're launching in! We have chemistry.

YOU: Yeah, I can feel subtext building up.

JULIA: Darn subtext! Okay. Okay. I don't like subtext either.

YOU: You've had bad experiences with it?

JULIA: Yeah. So what do you want to talk about?

YOU: You're weird, aren't you?

JULIA: Yes. Definitely. Are you weird?

YOU: I don't know. I don't know if I would fit in with weird people.

JULIA: What's that supposed to mean?

YOU: I don't know. There's too much subtext.

JULIA: We're going to have to do something about the subtext. Why don't we play a game of Scrabble?

YOU: Um, OK, sure.

JULIA: I'll go get it.

You're having that all-too-familiar feeling of reality bending and being perfectly normal at the same time. Fate strikes. It always strikes you. You are fate's victim.

Julia returns with the pristine Scrabble box.

You go first and write ASP on the board. She counters with PARIAH.

She's ten years younger than you. You can tell. Okay. A younger person. When you thought she was your age, at first, you didn't know what to think. You didn't know if you could handle someone that strong, that unhinged.

But if she's younger, you can put some distance on her. She's not a threat.

YOU: So what brings you to the old Hellscape?

JULIA: I'm an actress.

YOU: Yeah? How long have you been going for that?

JULIA: Since I was a kid. It's been my life's purpose.

YOU: That's interesting. How do you know it's your life's purpose?

JULIA: It's been the only thing I've been interested in since I was a kid. So clearly, it's my purpose. My purpose would have to be something that I wanted to do a lot.

YOU: That makes sense, assuming your life has a purpose.

JULIA: It absolutely does have a purpose. Your life has a purpose too. How old are you?

You never care who knows how close you are to the grave.

YOU: I'm 41.

JULIA: Oh wow, I'm 30!

YOU: You're too old to be that happy about it.

JULIA: No, I'm not, my life has purpose!

YOU: And your purpose is to be happy?

JULIA: No. Not at all. But I stay young.

You look around.

YOU: [conspiratorially] You know... sometimes I think that if you stay in this cafe your whole life, you'll never die.

JULIA: I don't believe it. Explain.

YOU: How long have you been coming here?

JULIA: I just came here on a whim and a whisper.

YOU: Okay, well I've been coming here for years. And sometimes, if I close my eyes, and listen through the sounds in the cafe, I can hear the heart of the cafe. And if you can hear the heart of something, you can hear the reality that it's in. And this cafe is not rooted in this world of change and wonder. No, this cafe is rooted in a changeless place.

JULIA: Changeless?

YOU: Not like how $2 + 2$ is always 4, or like how John Lennon was always assassinated by Mark David Chapman. A different kind of changeless. The changeless of... eternal life.

JULIA: Are you messing with me? Are you trying to creep me out? Because it's starting to work.

You're surprised by this. You shouldn't be after so many times, but you always are. You can't talk about the spiritual world without freaking people out.

YOU: No, no, no. Don't be creeped out. Look, you either see it or you don't. Forget I said it.

JULIA: No, I've recovered my composure. Okay. So what is eternal life like?

YOU: I don't know, I only see the edge of it.

JULIA: Okay, so it's a place where things are changeless. So I never grow old and die.

YOU: I don't know.

JULIA: But what do we do there?

YOU: I think if we stay in this cafe in order to get to eternal life, we end up doing whatever we're doing now, in eternal life.

JULIA: So we play Scrabble?

YOU: And we talk. That's what Mitzi's Cafe is all about. Other cafes come and go. The Warren used to be down the street. But the decor inside wasn't well-executed, and it went under. It was a nice cafe, but ultimately Mitzi's is where we all went.

JULIA: We all? You have a pack of friends?

YOU: They're not really friends. They're not enemies. They're just people. They're my people. Cafe people.

JULIA: Oh, I know all about cafe people...

YOU: Yeah?

JULIA: I used to go to cafes when I was in college. There was always that weirdo.

YOU: Did you ever talk to anyone at the cafe back then?

JULIA: Just my friends, studying.

YOU: What you learn when you talk to people at cafes is that the people you would never talk to are weird, but they don't register very deeply with you because you don't talk to them. But it's the normal people at the cafe that are really weird, to you.

JULIA: Okay, yeah, that makes sense. Reality is what you feel, not what's out there.

YOU: Somehow that's true. That's something I'm still learning.

JULIA: Do you believe in friendship?

YOU: What do you mean by that?

JULIA: I mean, can two people really be friends? I mean, really. Not just saying they are, but actually being there for each other.

YOU: I think so.

JULIA: Have you ever been friends with anyone?

YOU: Yeah...

JULIA: You don't sound convinced...

YOU: There have certainly been people I thought of as friends, and they thought of me as a friend...

JULIA: And you treated each other as friends, yeah, I know! I know all about that! But were you really friends?

YOU: Wow, I don't know, now that you say that... I don't really know...

You think about the Usual Suspects, your List of people from your past. Was he a friend? Or was it all a romantic game? Was she a friend? Or did she just want you for conversations and advice? What about Brian? Was Brian your friend? He would go on and on about I-You as opposed to I-It and it was exactly the kind of thing that gets at this question right? He was a nice guy. Brian... what happened to Brian?

JULIA: [looking you right in the eye] Beth. Listen to me. You're going to find a real friend someday.

YOU: Julia, I want to believe you.

JULIA: You're going to have to trust the universe.

The door opens, the jingle bells ring, Mitzi's has absorbed another globule into the interior of its cell.

It's Brian.

Brian goes straight to the counter, as he always does, assiduous to get his drink before he sits down. On one occasion, it was a crowded day and he got his drink and then found there was nowhere to sit. There wasn't even room at your table because it was finals and you were sharing with some college students. So he stood next to you with his "For here" mug in his hands and talked and tried to drink his tea fast, but after he burned his tongue he had to wait, standing there with his fat backpack pulling on him, getting in people's way as they walked in and out, feeling embarrassed but committed to his mug and to talking to you, getting his money's worth.

Brian goes straight to the counter and orders some peppermint tea. He talks with Alicia as he pays, then gets his

tea and goes over to your table.

YOU: Brian, it's been a long time. I was just thinking of you.

BRIAN: Hey, Beth, hey, who's this?

JULIA: Julia.

BRIAN: Hey Julia, you have a very pretty face.

JULIA: Thanks! I got some cosmetic surgery done. Can you tell?

BRIAN: Now that you mention it, I kind of can. Very nice.

JULIA: When you complimented my face, were you flirting with me? I'm not good with subtext.

BRIAN: Me neither! Um, I don't know, I'm kind of celibate.

JULIA: What does that mean? Like you don't have sex?

BRIAN: No, it's not about that...

JULIA: You have sex but you don't date people?

BRIAN: No, it's not that exactly either...

JULIA: What is celibacy? Break it down to me. I'm a movie person. If you were to make a movie of it, how would you do that?

BRIAN: Um, well, so, the thing is...

JULIA: Is it a dirty thing? How is it dirty?

BRIAN: Well, no, the thing is that... Okay, so you know how in a romantic comedy, you can show the couple flirting, and then getting involved and then having a fight, and then... they can kiss! You can put the kiss onscreen and that's the relationship. Well... with celibacy it's different. Let's say you have a movie about a monk. You could show the monk cleaning the floor of the monastery, and you could show a few seconds of him praying, before the audience got bored. You could show him chanting Psalms with the other brothers. Let's say he's not a monk, but he's a social reformer.

JULIA: You can do that? Just change him into a social reformer?

BRIAN: Deep down, it's the same man, the same celibacy.

JULIA: Okay, I see that.

BRIAN: So if he's a social reformer, you can see him protesting and writing letters to people in Congress. And if he becomes governor, you can show him giving an acceptance speech. You can show all that. But in either

version of this guy's life, can you show his celibacy? What would you show?

JULIA: So celibacy is emptiness?

BRIAN: But it's not really emptiness...

JULIA: Then what is it? Are you happy?

BRIAN: Yes, I think overall I'm happy.

JULIA: But with your celibacy, are you happy with your celibacy?

BRIAN: Well...

JULIA: Well, what? I don't think you're happy. I think I just figured you out.

You listen to the fate of this exchange, and feel yourself coming in by instinct.

YOU: Julia, please don't figure him out. Don't ever figure him out.

JULIA: Sorry, Beth. It's Beth, right?

BRIAN: Do you two know each other?

YOU: We do now.

BRIAN: OK.

YOU: So what brings you to Mitzi's, Brian? It's been a long time.

BRIAN: Well, the last time I was here was six months ago.

YOU: Yeah, and you haven't been here since. What happened?

BRIAN: Margot and I had a falling out.

YOU: Really? I saw her here a few months ago and she didn't say anything about it.

BRIAN: So she's been here since?

YOU: Not very often.

BRIAN: Okay, well I was hoping to see her here again.

YOU: Yeah, she might show up. I'll be here.

JULIA: Who was Margot?

BRIAN: Someone we both knew.

YOU: Brian knew her better than I did.

BRIAN: I don't know, she was kind of weird.

JULIA: Beth and I were just having a conversation about that, about how everyone's weird and everyone's living forever.

BRIAN: She was weird, but only around the outside. In the middle she was like clear water. A clear stream, flowing down a mountain.

YOU: Yeah, that sounds right.

JULIA: Okay, so what I understand is the universe. I don't understand what you guys are talking about.

BRIAN: It's not like you have to understand it. The way I look at it is, you pay attention to someone enough, your mind puts together a picture of them. I paid a lot of attention to Margot. So I kind of saw who she really was. I could see things about her that she couldn't see, because she was so busy talking to me or to whoever else she was talking about. What I see in her is just a picture.

JULIA: Beth, let me understand this: You said that Mitzi's heart is in eternity and in eternity, things never change, right? I never get old. If I never leave this cafe, I never die, right? All that is things you said, correct?

YOU: Yes, that's right.

JULIA: So is Margot a stream of water with weirdness around the outside? If I meet her, am I going to be thinking, "stream of water in there"?

YOU: Yes, she is a stream of water. That's what she really is. She looks like a woman, and she acts like a human being, but her true nature is to be a pure and clear stream running down a mountain, in the unchangeable world.

JULIA: So if she stayed here in Mitzi's forever, she would turn into a stream of water?

YOU: Yes.

JULIA: Brian, what do you think? Is that true? Would she turn into a stream of water?

BRIAN: Um... no, I think that's just a perception of her, I mean, I'd like to think so. It's like, the idea of her turning into a stream of water is beautiful, so I want it to be true.

YOU: It is true.

BRIAN: How would it be true?

YOU: We don't belong to the world of the truth, except, there's part of us that does. It's like, if you're looking for what is most trustworthy, if you

keep looking, you find that spiritual vision is the most trustworthy. That's reality, what you see with spiritual eyes.

BRIAN: Okay, I hadn't heard you put it that way before.

JULIA: So if we stay in Mitzi's do I live unchanging forever?

YOU: No, you die, except, there's a part of you that lives on.

JULIA: The part of me with spiritual eyes?

YOU: Maybe so, that would make sense. But it might be more the part of you that your spiritual eyes see.

JULIA: Okay, when my spiritual eyes see something, *I* see it, right?

YOU: Yes...

JULIA: Then that *I* has to last forever?

YOU: I guess so...

BRIAN: Haha, it's funny, but I've never seen anyone die in Mitzi's. You may be right, Beth.

JULIA: So Brian, you're here to wait for Margot, then?

BRIAN: Yeah, but I have other reasons to be here, too. This is a good place to get work done. And it's nice to meet people.

JULIA: Brian, I'm an actress. So I know a thing or two about theater. Have you ever heard of the play *Waiting for Godot*?

BRIAN: No, what's it about?

JULIA: Don't read it, it'll depress you.

BRIAN: No, tell me what it's about. I need to know the truth, even if it kills me.

JULIA: You're never going to see Margot again, Brian. That's what the play's about. It's about how you're never going to see her again.

BRIAN: I don't think that truth would kill me... even if it were true. I don't know if it's true or not.

JULIA: So you're going to keep going? One step at a time?

BRIAN: One step at a time.

JULIA: You're never going to see Margot again, Brian.

YOU: She may come, and she may not. That's in the land of fact. But, Brian, Julia has a point. After a while, you might have to forget about her.

BRIAN: Yeah I was thinking about something like that...

YOU: You might have to quit going to Mitzi's...

BRIAN: Yeah, I could see that...

YOU: You might have to leave the Hellscape entirely, go to a new city...

BRIAN: Is it possible to get distance on the past? Mark David Chapman will always assassinate John Lennon in 1980, and the *Titanic* sinks every April, marks every calendar from here to eternity.

YOU: Brian, you have to live for your own life.

BRIAN: What if my life is endurance?

YOU: You mean, your inner nature is to wear your overstuffed backpack and trudge forever?

BRIAN: Yes. Is that my inner life?

YOU: I don't want to say either way.

JULIA: It is, isn't it?

YOU: You can't let yourself be deceived by the truth, Julia. That's the most insidious kind of deception.

JULIA: Let's play Scrabble. I want to escape from the truth.

BRIAN: Can I join you in your game of words?

YOU: Yes. Get some letters.

You play Scrabble with the cafe people, Brian and Julia.

The sun beats down and a dust storm comes through the street outside for 30 minutes. In these days, there is no longer enough water to keep the farmland at the edge of the Wondrous Hellscape irrigated, so dust blows in when the adiabatic winds come down the northern valley. It's no condition under which to go outside, but it's over before your game is.

Brian then has books to read, and Julia has somewhere else to be. You sit with your laptop, using the wifi, checking the Internet idly, following links and reading articles.

[Closing theme.]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
Episode 1 "Pilot"
Written 3 February 2019
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COMMENTS

1. There is a piece of folk art that depicts the *Titanic*, with each anniversary of its sinking written down on the page, stretching for decades. (Or even centuries? I saw the art a while ago in the Mingei Museum.)

ACT I

Episode 2 - "Jackson"

Your eyes grow tired and you realize that you are done editing for the day. It's three in the afternoon, and you wish that you could stay up forever. Stay up all night long and into the next day and into the next and the next. But you're tired, and you could take a nap, because you're self-employed, captain of your own ship. But if you take a nap, you'll never wake up. Death stalks you this afternoon. It's time for coffee. It's time to go to Mitzi's Cafe.

WAITING FOR MARGOT

by James Banks

Starring You as You (Beth)

You as Julia

You as Brian

You as...

JACKSON: So Julia, what was it you said you did? I don't want to pry, but it's a first date, and I need to understand the basics about you.

JULIA: I'm a high school teacher. How about you?

JACKSON: I'm a high school teacher, too. Substitute teacher. Also, I drive for one of those gig taxi replacement companies.

JULIA: Which shall not be named.

JACKSON: No. In fact, I don't work for them.

JULIA: They don't exist.

JACKSON: We have good chemistry, Julia. So how did you become a high school teacher?

JULIA: When I was a little girl, I always struggled to understand math. I wanted to understand math so bad.

JACKSON: How badly?

JULIA: I hated, I mean, absolutely *hated* doing the multiplication tables. We would do timed tests, and I would be struggling. And that smart kid, Sam Miller, would already be done, and he'd be doodling on the paper.

JACKSON: What a jerk.

JULIA: No, Sam was nice. Kinda weird, though.

JACKSON: So then what happened?

JULIA: In my story? Okay, so when I got into junior high school, I had a teacher who was really good. His name was Mr. Lee. He was a very compassionate man. He was empathic.

JACKSON: How empathic?

JULIA: Not too empathic. People have different kinds of empathy. He had an empathy for how it is people can have problems relating to math.

JACKSON: So he was able to help you.

JULIA: Jackson, (Can I use your name? JACKSON: yes), Jackson, he had confidence in me. He did a con job on me. I was totally taken in. I was suckered into seeing my own potential.

JACKSON: We should all be such suckers.

JULIA: Jackson, we have amazing chemistry.

JACKSON: So you became a teacher because of him?

JULIA: I knew what it was like to struggle, and I was grateful for how he gave me the confidence to succeed. I never got to being the best at math, so now I'm an English teacher.

JACKSON: Were you a good writer when you were younger?

JULIA: Yes, but even more so, an actor.

JACKSON: So you connected with the way he connected with you, and got into your head in a good way.

JULIA: Absolutely. It was like he turned little dials in my head just by the way he looked at me. I had the ability in me the whole time.

You have been quiet, sipping your coffee, the whole time.
This is the best part of the afternoon, when the leaves are
blowing outside and the children are walking home, so cute
as they shield themselves from the ash from the wildfires.

JULIA: So, Jackson, do you have any hobbies?

JACKSON: Well. I was going to save that for the second date. But since you bring it up. I'm a fire-breather.

JULIA: Oh wow, like the Kitchen Furnace Fire that's burning right now.

JACKSON: Yeah.

They acknowledge the death and destruction for a few seconds, then return to talking.

JULIA: Can you do a demonstration?

JACKSON: Yeah, sure, let's go outside.

JULIA: You have the lighter fluid with you all the time?

JACKSON: It's actually corn starch. Corn starch is safer.

JULIA: What's so dangerous about breathing fire? Can you die?

JACKSON: Yes.

JULIA: That's a serious hobby.

JACKSON: Yes, it's something that brings me meaning.

JULIA: Okay, so let's see some fire!

You see them go outside and you can see them through the window. Jackson starts to breathe fire a few times. A crowd begins to form, and just as it does, he stops. He and Julia come back in.

JULIA: Huh, that was impressive, but I didn't find it to be all that meaningful. It was just fire.

JACKSON: Yeah, maybe it's not meaningful. Maybe it's just fire.

JULIA: I didn't mean to depress you, Jackson, not on a first date.

JACKSON: Maybe we aren't soul mates, after all, Julia.

JULIA: Maybe not. Well, what do we talk about now?

You come over and say hello.

YOU: Nice fire breathing.

JACKSON: Oh hello, do you know Julia?

JULIA: We met in this cafe recently. Maybe a few days ago?

YOU: My name is Beth.

JACKSON: I'm Jackson.

YOU: So are you two still on a date?

JULIA: I don't know, Jackson, are we?

JACKSON: I guess if I get to know your friends, then I get to know you. It's not like we were going to kiss or anything. So yeah, she can join us.

JULIA: But we did have great chemistry...

JACKSON: True. But it's possible for three people to have chemistry, of a different sort.

YOU: I tend to slow down reactions.

JACKSON: That's good. We have to have some ballast to this ship of conversation. What do you do for a living?

YOU: I'm a freelance editor.

JACKSON: Wow, what kind of editing?

YOU: A lot of copy editing, but I do more complicated things sometimes. One time I helped someone put their autobiography together.

JACKSON: Okay, okay. I'm a substitute teacher. And I drive for one of those gig economy taxi substitutes.

YOU: Huh. I guess we're all gigging.

JACKSON: Julia isn't. She's a high school teacher.

YOU: That's interesting. I guess she is.

JACKSON: You mean she isn't?

YOU: When I met her, she said she was an actor.

JULIA: I was an actor, but now I'm a high school teacher.

JACKSON: So wait, after a few days now you have a completely different career?

JULIA: Jackson, Beth, come close. I have a secret (she whispers:) I'm a past-shifter.

JACKSON: A "past-shifter"?

JULIA: Uh huh. I can have different pasts, can tap into them. It's like a super power except... it's not really under my control.

YOU: But you're aware that you have different pasts? How does that work?

JULIA: What do you mean?

YOU: If you change pasts, how do you know that you've had different pasts before that? Wouldn't your current past not contain the memory of the other pasts?

JULIA: I have two memories. My "Julia-memory" and my "universe-

memory".

YOU: "Universe-memory" because the universe provides the memories?

JULIA: Not just the memories, though, the actual past. So one part of the past is memory, and another part is what's stored up in the present. Like, if I have a past as a ballerina, I can do ballet, and I also have all the memories of ballet instructors pushing me and pushing me and pushing me. As a high school teacher, I can teach high school, and, I also remember the teacher who inspired me.

YOU: Okay, that makes sense now.

JACKSON: Wow, so does that give you meaning?

JULIA: I don't believe in meaning. I believe in human happiness.

JACKSON: Oh, does human happiness give you meaning?

JULIA: No, it's just human happiness. Does meaning make you happy?

JACKSON: No, it's just meaning.

JULIA: We have amazing chemistry.

YOU: Is it possible that what we want as people is both happiness and meaning?

JULIA: Like if I got married to Jackson, we'd have normal kids? No way, Jackson and I are eternal principles, swaying over the ocean, carving up the sky into my stars and his stars. Meaning versus human happiness. There is no compromise, only eternal struggle.

JACKSON: I agree. It's too simple, too happiness-oriented, for the two to be reconciled.

JULIA: And I agree, too. It's too logical, too meaning-oriented, for the two to be understandable to each other.

YOU: They tend to go together, meaning and happiness. Think of all the depressed people out there in the city right now, who aren't experiencing either meaning or happiness. You two must both be feeling good, to be able to oppose one to the other.

JACKSON: We're flourishing. That's how it is that we're on a first date.

YOU: How strange it is to be in one life rather than another.

JULIA: I know! Some of my pasts are really terrible and for a whole week, I feel awful. But I don't know how long I'll have a past, so I never know.

JACKSON: Wow.

JULIA: And the worst thing is, when you have a past, *it comes with its own future*.

YOU: I think I read somewhere that Shakespeare must have been all men to be Shakespeare.

JULIA: What? How does that make sense?

YOU: Have you ever read Shakespeare? In English class, or as an actor?

JULIA: Oh yeah, today I taught *Romeo and Juliet*.

YOU: Okay, I think the idea behind what I read was how Shakespeare has these philosophical statements worked into his plays about what it's like to live a particular aspect of life. And how did he understand all this? He must have "been all men".

JULIA: But he wasn't actually all men.

JACKSON: Yeah, he was just observant.

YOU: Right. I think he was observant, but he also must have been able to see deeper into things.

JULIA: Okay, yeah, like how intuition is when you see deeper into things and then you can grasp something. That's what Mr. Lee did for me when he taught me math in junior high school. You know about Mr. Lee, Beth. I saw you eavesdropping.

YOU: Thank you for seeing me as I really am, Julia.

Brian enters, starts ordering.

JULIA: Brian! Hello!

BRIAN: Uh, hold on, I'm busy ordering. Uh, yes, I'll have honey with that, thank you.

Brian comes over to the table where Julia and Jackson are sitting, stands next to you standing.

BRIAN: I have some studying to do, but first I can say hello to you all. Hello, my name is Brian.

JACKSON: Hi, I'm Jackson.

YOU: He's a fire-breather.

BRIAN: A fire-breather?

JULIA: He breathed fire out in front of the cafe before you came. It's a serious hobby of his.

BRIAN: Oh, wow. What brings you to this, uh, cafe, Jackson?

JACKSON: I'm here on a date with Julia. But we decided just to hang out after all. We have chemistry, though.

BRIAN: Ah, yes... chemistry.

JACKSON: Sounds like there's a story there.

BRIAN: I know about chemistry. Mitzi's is famous for its chemistry.

JACKSON: Really? Did you know that, Julia?

JULIA: Everywhere I go is famous for its chemistry. It's another aspect of my superpower slash supercurse. Or it's something related.

JACKSON: Your environments fit you?

JULIA: My environment always fits me, whether I choose them or they bend to me.

JACKSON: So do you think we would have chemistry if we went somewhere else, Julia?

JULIA: Is it possible for us to exist anywhere other than here?

JACKSON: (pause) No. I see your point. Oh... you just got me, didn't you? You set me up...

JULIA: ...To say "the moment is only here and there's no meaning so let's just be happy"... yes! Ha ha! Score one for team human happiness!

JACKSON: Oooh! Well, guess what, saying "the moment is only here and there's no meaning" -- itself has meaning! Deal with that, happiness-lover!

JULIA: Okay yeah, the score is settled. What happy conflict this, what chemistry!

JACKSON: How meaningful this all is, how deep our shallow words! What chemistry indeed.

You see a man walk in and order iced coffee at the counter,
get it and then go and sit at a table by himself.

JACKSON: So Julia, I know we aren't going on a second date, but if we did, would we go to a restaurant?

JULIA: Yes, I think that would be nice. What kind of restaurant would you have in mind?

JACKSON: I would have in mind Chulin's.

JULIA: Oh, a Mexican place...

JACKSON: A fancy Mexican place.

JULIA: That would have been a good choice, if you would have chosen it.

JACKSON: Oh, I would have. I would have been trying to send a message by doing that.

BRIAN: You're doing that thing politicians do, when they give a speech and the people know the politician is trying to convince them they're a certain kind of person, and it still convinces them.

JACKSON: I would have been doing exactly that. I will have, Julia, if you would.

JULIA: Exactly. What's that smell? It smells like marzipan.

MAN: That would be my cyanide you're smelling.

JULIA: Cyanide? Are you going to poison us?

MAN: No. (sadly) Just myself.

JULIA: Don't drink it!

YOU: Yeah, you don't have to kill yourself.

MAN: It's too late, I already drank it. I put it in my iced coffee. I drank it.

YOU: Should I call 911?

JULIA: I'm calling 911.

YOU: Wait, let the man speak.

MAN: With the dose I took, there's no hope. In fact, I'm surprised I'm not dead yet.

YOU: Oh, right. You're in Mitzi's Cafe. Nobody dies in Mitzi's Cafe. Please, before you go outside and try again out there, let's talk. You might not have to kill yourself.

MAN: Hello, my name is Tom.

YOU: I'm Beth.

JACKSON: Jackson.

JULIA: Julia.

BRIAN: I'm Brian.

TOM: The reason I want to kill myself is because there's no meaning anymore.

JULIA: Are you depressed?

TOM: As in unhappy? No, I lack meaning. Happiness is my problem.

JULIA: Isn't it better to be happy? I think you should be happy.

JACKSON: No, Julia, it's not all about happiness...

JULIA: Keep your chemistry out of this, Jackson...

YOU: You two need to argue this out. Go over to the other table and figure things out.

JACKSON: Okay.

JULIA: Alright.

They go back across the cafe where they had been sitting before, and try to keep their voices down as they argue and gesture.

YOU: Okay, Tom, tell us the story.

TOM: My wife and I were out hiking near the beach, and there was a storm. The storm surge was making it difficult to come around the headland to get where the beach was wider. We just barely made it through and then I could hear a man calling for help in the water behind us. I started to move to try to rescue him but my wife put her hand on me. "Wait", she said. So I just stood there, and then the cries for help stopped. And we stood there for a while and then walked on down the shore, in the rain and wind.

YOU: Your wife did that.

TOM: She loved me.

YOU: So then what?

TOM: So then I got to thinking. Is there anything I would give my life for?

YOU: It looks like you would give it for the sake of life.

TOM: Yeah. And I forgave myself for what I didn't do. And my wife. You have to keep living, right? That's the number one thing. But I thought about that... you have to keep living... that's the number one thing... And I realized that I didn't believe in anything.

Julia and Jackson return.

JULIA: You don't believe in anything? Why does that matter? You're alive.

TOM: If I was in the right circumstances, I would do anything to survive. My wife is pregnant right now. In times of war, when people were trapped in cities without any food, do you know what some people did? They ate

their own children. I would eat my own child.

JULIA: No, you wouldn't. That's terrible. How can you say that?

JACKSON: Yeah, maybe you would be one of the people who didn't eat their children.

TOM: Maybe. But I let the man drown. So why would I be different with my child? Same me, different circumstances.

JULIA: Okay. I have a thing to tell you. I've been in many different circumstances. You are who you are. There's no comparing you with anyone else. Don't compare yourself with stories from a book. You are you. You are not the sort of person who would eat your own child in a time of famine.

TOM: You might be right. I might find it easier to starve than to kill, just as I found it easier to stand than to try to save.

JULIA: Exactly. Don't think about the things that will make your life worse. Thoughts that don't make your life better aren't true.

TOM: That's an interesting thought. Isn't there a real world out there, regardless of my own self-interest? I want to connect with that world. I don't want to be sunk into my own self-interest. That's what I realized my whole life was, me being sunk into my own self-interest, my own resources, my own limitations, my own tastes, my own anxieties, my own satisfactions, my own pleasures, my own comforts, my own fatigue, my own anger, my own apathy. All just me inside myself.

JULIA: But you're married.

TOM: And what do you think all my conversations are like with my wife? *Our* self-interest, our resources, our limitations, our own tastes, our own anxieties, our own worries, our own pet names, our own fights, our own comforts, our own lovemaking, our own enemies, our own TV shows to watch. We were sunken into our own relationship, two sunken-in people sunken-in to each other. Is that love?

YOU: Where's your wife now?

TOM: She's back at home where I left her.

YOU: If you kill yourself, you're going to leave her alone, and then she'll have to raise your child alone.

TOM: Yeah, it is selfish to commit suicide, isn't it? Life is pointless, but it's selfish to leave it. So then our child can grow up and deal with this problem all over again.

BRIAN: So... there's a law, an absolute, don't be selfish. So, that's

meaningful.

TOM: But it's not the kind of meaning I want.

JULIA: No. That's not good enough. You need to live for life's sake, not for a law's sake.

TOM: That's another thing. Putting life on a pedestal. That's like putting survival on a pedestal.

JULIA: Life and survival are two different things. Absolutely different.

TOM: But there has to be something better than life.

JULIA: No, that's stupid. Don't hold out for anything better than life.

Julia walks away, forcefully and dramatically, to the other table.

TOM: Maybe so. (He looks sad)

YOU: Why are you sad?

TOM: Now I don't know what to do. Being opposed to life gave me something to live for. Now what?

YOU: I don't know.

BRIAN: I don't know, either. But I don't think it's stupid to hold out for something, better than life. I've been looking for God all these years, for years and years, and all I've ever gotten from people is... life. That's all there is. Life. As though God doesn't need to exist. And... just now... I realize... that talking about this, complaining, outcry... this is more life, this is more nothing-but-life. If I want God, I have to pray.

TOM: So pray. You know how, after years and years.

BRIAN: Okay...

Tom stands and they put their arms on each other's shoulders.

BRIAN: Lord, we knew you from when we were born in the garden, playing with leaves, every leaf knew you, every stone from your hand, the animals could not have run with their sinews and bones without your design, you spoke in every drop of water. We started to ask, to doubt, to distrust the meaning of everything. Lord God, why are we trapped in this life, this life of ours? Why do you not save us? We cry out to you to save us, Lord, come into our lives, Lord, save us, God, you saved us in times past, O Lord, what do we have now? We have perfection, we have life everlasting without you. We made a life for ourselves without you and this life will never end. We are never going to end. There is no death. You are

gone, Lord, save us.

TOM: Save us, God.

BRIAN: Save us from empty happiness. Speak to us, God.

TOM: Speak to us.

(They fall silent.)

TOM: Thank you.

BRIAN: You and I are not alone.

TOM: Now what?

BRIAN: I, guess, you can go out and live. And you can come back here. I'm here all the time.

TOM: Okay. Will the cyanide kill me when I go outside? How does Mitzi's work?

BRIAN: You may have to stay here until all the cyanide gets out of your system. I'll talk to Alicia to see if you can stay the night.

(Alicia overhears all.)

ALICIA: Yeah, that's fine. You guys can play Scrabble.

(silence)

BRIAN: (to Jackson) So when you went off to talk to Julia, did you come to an understanding about meaning and human happiness?

JACKSON: No. I'm still on Team Meaning, and she's still on Team Human Happiness.

BRIAN: Okay.

JACKSON: I thought your prayer was nice, but isn't meaning more important than God? Why have God in the picture, why not just meaning?

BRIAN: How do you think meaning works?

JACKSON: What do you mean?

BRIAN: Well, if I say, "that table is meaningful", why is it meaningful?

JACKSON: What do you mean by that?

BRIAN: Okay, maybe it's meaningful because God made it and put it here.

JACKSON: But God didn't make it and put it here. Human beings did. And

we're the ones who find the table meaningful. It's meaningful to us.

BRIAN: Is the table itself meaningful?

JACKSON: Yes, to us.

BRIAN: Does the meaning come from the table to us?

JACKSON: I guess so. Yeah, where else would it come from?

BRIAN: Does the table know it's a table? After all, isn't it just wood that's screwed together?

JACKSON: No, the table doesn't know it's a table. Okay, so that is a puzzle.

BRIAN: The table has to know what you're looking at, how you conceptualize it, in order to communicate the meaning.

JACKSON: That's weird, because tables are just dead wood put together arbitrarily. So how can the table have meaning? How can we get meaning from it?

BRIAN: It's fairly simple. What if the table knows your mind?

JACKSON: How could that be?

BRIAN: What if the table is part of God's body? So everything you look at, you're looking at God. And God speaks to you through himself.

JACKSON: Huh. I have to think about that. It does seem to solve the puzzle. But now I have to wrestle with the thought that God might exist. Should I start trusting the universe now? I don't know if that's such a good idea.

BRIAN: You have a serious hobby, Jackson. You already trust the universe. You're always trusting the universe.

JACKSON: I don't know... I'm still not convinced.

JULIA: (coming back from a trip to the bathroom) What're you guys talking about?

JACKSON: God.

JULIA: Oh, are you guys religious?

JACKSON: No.

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: Oh, I knew you were religious, Brian, after that prayer. But as for you, Jackson... you're on Team Meaning, right? You should be religious. Or, are you some kind of existentialist?

JACKSON: I will have been an existentialist at Chulin's next Saturday night, and you are free to temporally displace yourself over there right now and see for yourself.

JULIA: Ha! You're funny, Jackson. You're a good first date.

JACKSON: The chemistry is mine, Julia.

You stay for a while. Julia and Jackson leave, separately. Brian and Tom talk, and then go look at the board game selection. Eventually, you decide to go home, and they're reading magazines from the pile on the coffee table by the overstuffed chairs.

[Closing theme.]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 2 "Jackson"

Written 10 February 2019

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COMMENTS

1. According to <http://firetothemax.com/paraffin-vs-white-gas-fire-spinning-fuel/>, a certain kind of paraffin is good for firebreathing but corn starch is safer. (Recommending corn starch as safer does not take away from the inherent danger of fire-breathing.)

Episode 3 - "Robert"

You wake up without an alarm, every morning at 8AM, and today is one of those days. You lie in bed for a few minutes, like you usually do. Being a freelancer means that you are free, free to be jelly. You get up, using your freelancing discipline. People who appear undisciplined are sometimes the most disciplined.

You think about this a little bit in the shower, and a little bit as you brush your teeth. You brush your teeth every morning without effort, but it always takes some effort to get out of bed.

You go to your kitchen and make oatmeal. It cooks quickly

and you eat it. The oatmeal is heavy and cheap. You eat a banana. It's Saturday.

You decide that this Saturday will be a Saturday you take off. You can catch up tonight if you want, or tomorrow if you have to. You decide that it's time for...

A LAZY MORNING AT MITZI'S CAFE

(waiting for margot episode three starring YOU as YOU (Beth), YOU as JULIA, YOU as BRIAN, YOU as..., You as..., you as..., you..., ...,)

ALICIA: Welcome to Mitzi's, how's it going?

YOU: It's morning time. It's time to exist.

ALICIA: I know. We're always existing.

YOU: I'd like some green tea.

ALICIA: You want to be awake?

YOU: Yeah. Today I do.

You pay and she measures the loose leaves into a little bag, puts them in a mug, pours in hot water, hands you the mug.

ALICIA: There you go. Have a nice morning!

YOU: Thanks.

You sit down and read from your library book. You put your phone where you can see it. You're reading a novel, but sometimes you look around the cafe absentmindedly, avoiding eye contact while still looking at people.

Then you get a text message. It's from Robert.

(Robert)
Hey Beth

(You)
Whats up?

(Robert)
I feel like talking to someone

(Robert)
Are you available?

(You)
Yeah, Im here at Mitzis doing nothing much

(Robert)
Cool

(Robert)
Mind if I join you there?

(You)
Ill be here

Robert is someone you've known from before, from the past. You met him on an online dating site, back when you were more into that. He's the only person you remember from that time in your life.

You wait and read and then he walks in the door, comes and greets you. You give him a greeting-hug and both of you sit at your table.

ROBERT: Hey, I think I'll get something to drink first. I need some coffee.

YOU: Okay.

He gets up and orders coffee. Alicia pours him some house coffee. He goes over and puts some half-and-half in it, comes back and sits down.

ROBERT: Okay. (He settles.) Okay. How are you doing?

YOU: I'm doing okay.

ROBERT: Is that really true?

YOU: I'm 41 years old, so, yeah, I'm doing okay.

Robert laughs.

ROBERT: Of course.

YOU: What do you need to talk about?

ROBERT: How's the terror of death treating you?

YOU: It's not too bad recently. I think I've been believing in God.

ROBERT: Really?

YOU: Yeah, I'm not really sure, but I think that might be happening.

ROBERT: Good for you. Yeah, I should probably believe in God myself.

YOU: You don't have to if you don't want to.

ROBERT: That's the thing. I know it would be good for me, but I don't feel like it's the truth. But it's weird, because if there is no God, why would I care about the truth? Why not just believe what's good for me?

YOU: It's good to care about the truth, though. If there is a God, I think he would want people to not believe in him because they didn't think he really existed.

ROBERT: Yeah, you might be right. I used to think that I didn't have any choice as to whether or not to believe in God. I thought that there were the things that existed, and the things that were unproven. And God was unproven. But then I got to thinking. When my mind is healthiest, like, not in the terror of death, or paranoid, or whatever, it really feels like everything's going to work out in the end, somehow. And I think that could just be contact with God.

YOU: Why would you think that? Maybe it's just a way you have to feel to survive.

ROBERT: I know! So that's the thing. Belief is a choice, and unbelief is a choice. And I don't want it to be a choice. I want it to be clear.

YOU: I know that unbelief is a choice for me. It's like an aesthetic thing. I don't want to be the kind of person I see believers being.

ROBERT: I know, right? It's not like I think about it a lot, I just get a twinge when I see them feeling purpose in their life, or being confident. It's like they're children. You hear of neoteny?

YOU: The thing where immaturity is prolonged?

ROBERT: Yeah, like it takes human beings 35 years to become adults. Believers are people who never grow up.

YOU: Sometimes it makes them better at actually being adults.

ROBERT: I know, and I want that for myself. But I want to be mature. I want to be a real human being.

YOU: You want to be God...

ROBERT: ...But not in an egotistical way. In a responsible way. I want to be responsible for the whole world, like he is.

YOU: And people will tell you you can't do that. But you have to try.

Because in your heart, you want to have the heart of God.

ROBERT: And part of what makes God have the heart he would have if he existed is that there's no God above God. In that respect, God's an atheist.

YOU: Absolutely.

ROBERT: Do you still believe in the world?

YOU: Some days I do. A lot of the time I don't. I live in my bubble, getting work done, and hanging out.

ROBERT: I wonder what God would do if there was no one to save. What would he get out of existing? What would get him out of bed in the morning?

YOU: I don't know. What does love do when there's no one to save?

ROBERT: I think about that a lot. God aside, what if we make a society where people no longer have problems? We'll lose part of what is best about humanity if no one can take responsibility for the world.

YOU: It's like some aspect of love would be gone...

ROBERT: So, love is the thing that gets us to solve problems, and then love is going to kill off part of itself.

YOU: I don't know if it's always love that gets us to solve problems, or rather perfectionism. We hate problems, so we destroy them.

ROBERT: "Whatever can be destroyed by the truth should be..."

YOU: Yeah. And the truth obviously is opposed to our problems.

ROBERT: Right! It's not necessarily.

YOU: Did you ever meet Brian?

ROBERT: I think so, once or twice.

YOU: He comes here. He likes to talk about skepticism. Like, how is it that we really know that the external world is real, and that we're not living in a dream.

ROBERT: Okay, easy, there's this Stoic philosopher who said to his master, if you're a skeptic, deny this, and then cut off his master's tongue while he was shaving him. Tell me this isn't reality, -- while killing him.

YOU: So then the truth is beliefs that we should, or just do, trust.

ROBERT: Yeah, it kind of sounds like that. Or it could be natural selection. If there was someone who evolved false beliefs and then walked off a cliff based on them, then they wouldn't exist to pass on their genes or culture.

YOU: Right. But it seems like that's still, the truth is what humans find trustworthy. It's all based on human survival, like we're the center of the universe.

ROBERT: But we still have this concept that there are things outside ourselves, like the truth idea is *really* compelling.

YOU: It's certainly trustworthy. But it's not always trustworthy.

ROBERT: The idea that we aren't the center of the universe is pretty trustworthy.

YOU: A lot of times it feels like I can't even wake up enough to trust things. The most trustworthy thing in the world could walk past me and I wouldn't trust it. Wouldn't even look at it.

ROBERT: Is that some subtext?

YOU: No way Robert, I would never use subtext on you.

ROBERT: Okay, good.

YOU: Not deliberately, at least.

ROBERT: Can I ever trust you to just be saying what you're saying, once the door to subtext is open?

YOU: I find one of the most difficult things to sort out is other people's minds.

ROBERT: It's probably the biggest epistemological challenge, day-to-day.

YOU: If you don't want there to be subtext in what you're saying, you have to stay on top of what everyone has been saying in the conversation and then say the right thing. As I've gotten older, I've gotten a little better at that being in control of a conversation thing, but it's hard.

ROBERT: I know. If you can't stay in control of a conversation, the relationship takes over, and the people involved get lost in the relationship.

You both laugh at what are probably the same memories.

YOU: Are you seeing anyone these days?

ROBERT: No. Not anymore. But there was someone I met at an acting group.

YOU: An actor?

ROBERT: Just an amateur.

YOU: What kind of acting group?

ROBERT: We just get together and read plays. I'm not even really an actor.

YOU: One of the newer regulars here is an actor. Actually, I'm not sure what she is. She says her pasts change.

ROBERT: Her pasts change?

YOU: Like she really was a ballerina once, and then her whole past changed and she really was a professional actor, and then her whole past changed and she really was an English teacher. Like, her pasts change.

ROBERT: Wow, that's pretty weird, but things like that do happen.

YOU: Really? I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, but I wondered if she was just telling a story.

ROBERT: No, there have been documented cases of this. It's pretty rare though.

YOU: How did they prove it to be true?

ROBERT: Basically, they just had them demonstrate their skills when they were in a given past. Also they measured their muscles. Ballerina muscles don't come and go overnight, normally.

YOU: Okay. Interesting. So this is something we can test.

ROBERT: Isn't that reassuring?

YOU: Yeah. When I said "this is something we can test", I could feel myself getting into the unbelieving mindset. As though the only things I was interested in were known things.

ROBERT: I guess that's one way out of the terror of death. You just say that death is something that you can't ever know, it's "the unknown". So you don't ever think about it because you've trained yourself only to be interested in what you can verify.

YOU: The other day someone came in and tried to commit suicide but it didn't work.

ROBERT: Oh? It was probably one of those things that happen. We can't say anything about it so let's not think about it.

YOU: Right? But I've been having this feeling that this cafe is a place where no one ever dies.

ROBERT: That's nice. So that's your solution to the terror of death. Never leave this place.

YOU: But I like this idea of only concerning myself with the verifiable.

ROBERT: It's a nice idea. It feels really mature, you know? You're being

careful and modest, and we like those values.

YOU: Yeah, if we were a warrior society, we wouldn't think it was so great.

ROBERT: Warrior? Oh right, bragging.

YOU: Yeah, but here I am, programmed the way that I am, in this culture, so, I'll take whatever makes me feel good, right?

ROBERT: Yeah, I mean the terror of death doesn't do you much good, does it?

YOU: No, not really, it doesn't get me to actually avoid death. But it does give me a kind of energy.

ROBERT: Yeah? Maybe you shouldn't try to get rid of it, then. You're really productive?

YOU: Yeah, I've been writing.

ROBERT: Good for you.

YOU: But no one is going to read my writing.

ROBERT: Yeah, you're probably right.

YOU: So what's the point of the terror of death? I like this verifiability thing.

ROBERT: But you were into God, weren't you?

YOU: Yeah. Weren't you thinking you should believe in God?

ROBERT: Yeah, I don't know.

YOU: We don't know anything.

ROBERT: Except that we're here.

YOU: Isn't it reassuring to say that? To find someone to agree with on something?

ROBERT: Absolutely.

YOU: So, if you're seeking the truth, there's no reason to believe in God, because the best truth doesn't show that God exists. We can't verify him.

ROBERT: But, it turns out that truth reduces to trustworthiness.

YOU: But belief in God isn't any better than verification, at least in dealing with the terror of death.

ROBERT: But what if trustworthiness isn't just about living your life in a smooth way? What if it's trustworthy to seek the ultimate?

YOU: Yeah. That feels right.

ROBERT: Yeah, so we're just too confused to even figure out that since we're confused we don't have to look beyond our lived lives.

YOU: So confused. We are so confused. How about we do something from the old days?

ROBERT: You want to start something?

YOU: Nothing permanent. I'm not ready to bring back any of those ghosts.

ROBERT: Those fragrances, you mean...

YOU: Those immaterial beings...

ROBERT: What do you have in mind?

YOU: Do you still have your jetskis?

ROBERT: No, but I know where to rent them. Over at Anderson Reservoir.

YOU: Any plans for the rest of the day?

ROBERT: No, not today.

YOU: Okay. Let's go.

ROBERT: You're feeling spontaneous?

YOU: I'm feeling the ultimate.

The plan is to go to your place for you to get your bathing suit, and then to go to his place to get his bathing suit, and then to go to Anderson Reservoir. You sit in his warm car, a snug feeling (which you get when you buckle up in any car, you carless person), and he turns the AC on and you talk of a few things, work through your plan, park at Anderson Reservoir, get out of the car, shut the doors, he locks them, you both walk over to the rental spot, split the cost, get your steed, get on the water.

ROBERT: You know, Beth, you could die out here. You're not at Mitzi's.

YOU: That's true.

Robert drives first and you sit behind him, with your arms around him. Why? Why is life like this? What are you doing out on this reservoir? The jetski is loud and exciting and all you can do is think about the ultimate. Maybe you're really here for a thrill. Maybe it's just the machinery of the human mind. Maybe you just want to conquer your fear of death by

doing something risky, as a break from your riskless days, when you can do nothing but think of Death the Inevitable. Death the Risk is preferable to Death the Inevitable. Everything you do is an escape from death. There's nothing else to life but to escape death, every morning run away from it. Unless... you hear God's voice all the time, you see God's speech rushing toward you and breaking into a wake behind you. You and God, you and your Beloved (not Robert), but God doesn't exist and THE JETSKI TIPS YOU OFF and you laugh in the water, glad you can swim, there is no death today, you two get back on and you say "I better drive" and his arms are around you, and God's speech flies in your face and you see the brown hills around the reservoir, and you curve around the people you need to avoid and after a few hours it's all over, you return your rental on time because you're adults, and you dry off in the shade under the shelter, and you're hungry so when you're dry you get in the car and drive to a burger joint.

YOU: Oh, I forgot to mention, I'm a vegetarian now.

ROBERT: Again?

YOU: Yeah.

ROBERT: Fish OK?

YOU: Yeah, sometimes I eat fish. So actually I'm a pescetarian.

ROBERT: I don't think they have fish here. Do you like veggie burgers?

YOU: Yeah, usually.

ROBERT: Let's see if they have any veggie burgers. If not, somewhere else.

YOU: (offering) I'll pay.

ROBERT: No, we're splitting.

YOU: (with relief) Thank you.

You get into Caruso's Italian Burger Joint and see on the menu that there's a Pesto Olive Mushroom Burger. Luxury. Robert orders the Meatball Marinara Burger, and you go and sit at a table.

YOU: There are people starving right now.

ROBERT: While we're hungry, people are starving, yeah.

YOU: Should we pray for them?

ROBERT: Would it do them any good?

YOU: I don't know.

ROBERT: Do you want to pray, or should I pray?

YOU: Which one of us wants to believe in God more?

ROBERT: I'll pray.

God... If you exist... there are people who don't get enough food... if there's some way... we can help... show us... the world is a place... where people starve... but... you can help them... somehow...

YOU: Amen.

You feel a kind of thrill, to have agreed with him.

The burgers arrive, unblessed by any prayer, and neither of you are afraid at all of them not being nourishment to your body. Nothing about this burger joint indicates that it's a place where you will get food poisoning. You satisfy your hungers for food, without talking to each other, and sit digesting.

ROBERT: Well, that was a nice afternoon. It's still a nice afternoon. Is this late lunch?

YOU: I think so.

ROBERT: When you don't have a 9 to 5, you can have lunch anytime you want.

YOU: Yeah, I can eat whenever I want. But I try to keep a routine.

ROBERT: You don't want to start waking up at noon.

YOU: Right.

ROBERT: Waking up at noon isn't all bad.

YOU: I don't want to get lost in time. Do you ever wish you didn't have a routine?

ROBERT: No. The other side of the fence is unverifiable, so I don't concern myself with it.

He smiles at, you laugh at, his little joke.

ROBERT: Yeah, of course I wish I didn't have a routine sometimes.

And with that, you get up and push your chairs in. You go the women's restroom and he goes to the men's, you meet up outside the joint and get into his car and he takes you back to your apartment, and he goes home.

And all you can do for two hours is to walk back and forth, looking at the ornamental plums in blossom, walking past them outside on the street, going from place to place, trying to get your bearings, trying to process all that was said and done today. You wonder, why is life like this? Why is life so heart-breaking in its beauty? You walk and think of Robert, and wonder if the layers of age should be pulled back, for you to know him in the way he knew you when you were younger. You can still be deliberate. Is this the meaning of life? Is it to have a man? Or is it to meet God? Or is it to experience experiences? Just as your mind gravitates toward what is heaviest, your spirit levitates toward what is faintest. And what does your heart love? You are here in your experiences, in yourself, resting from what came from outside you.

You go inside your apartment. Now what? The camera keeps rolling, to spoil every moment by somehow changing its past and future into something totally new. You know that you will forget today -- or will you? You get out a diary and describe what you can remember of it. Will you have time to read your diary later? You will have time to read an entry or two. But you feel like you will not. No, nothing epoch-making happened today. Time comes to claim you. You call a friend on the phone and tell her of your day, hang up the phone, make dinner, and eat it and sit around all evening, trying to shake the thought that today will be gone forever, not even so late as when you die, but in a week or two. And then you open up your laptop and decide, why not get ahead on your work?

Your work done for the day, you dress for bed, and sit on the edge of it, and you try to pray your own prayer.

YOU: Oh God, what is life? What is this thing that you have given us?

You hear no answer, and finish getting ready for bed, turn out the light, get under the covers, and wait for sleep -- for death.

[Slow fade to black, silence, you breathe.]

[Closing theme.]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 3 "Robert"

Written 12 February 2019

Released 12 February 2023

COMMENTS

1. That confusing part is pretty confusing, huh? Maybe the reader gains extra empathy by experiencing the same thing at the same time as the characters do.

Episode 4 - "Brian"

You close up your laptop on this fine rainy day, this day of fine drizzle, and walk around your apartment a little bit. Not enough movement today. You get your raincoat and umbrella, put the umbrella down to put the raincoat on -- your mind is fuzzed from editing. You pick up the umbrella and open the door of your apartment, step outside and open your umbrella, and shut the door and lock it, and walk down the street.

There's no guilt in life. A lifetime ago, people felt guilt. But not anymore. Things are unhealthy or not, but there's no guilt. You wonder about this. "Maybe we should feel guilt", you think. "Maybe I should. Maybe when I do the wrong thing, I should feel guilt." But the thought doesn't stick.

Your mind has plenty of other things to go through as you go around the block and up the boulevard and down the avenue and around the other block and back. Soon, of course, you find yourself at...

MITZI's CAFE

Where there, sitting reading a book, is Brian.

(waiting for margot episode four starring YOU as BRIAN, YOU as JULIA, YOU as YOU... and YOU as...)

As you walk in, a man leaves the counter with his coffee and walks toward Brian, on his way to an empty table. You stand in line for your own drink, green tea. Behind you, you hear them talking.

MAN: What are you reading?

BRIAN: Just some philosophy.

MAN: Are you a philosophy student?

BRIAN: Um, yeah, I guess, not at a university though.

MAN: You didn't want to give me the wrong impression and I appreciate that. I remember when I was younger, I used to read philosophy. I guess the fact that I don't now means it's pretty irrelevant to me. But maybe it still has something valuable for you.

BRIAN: Yeah, I think it's pretty valuable. Have you heard of *I and Thou*, by Martin Buber?

MAN: No, what's that one about?

BRIAN: It's about how we see people as things, or we see them as people. We see things as mechanisms, or we see holistically.

MAN: Do you need to read the whole book to figure out what you just said, or can I just take what you said and apply it?

BRIAN: Um, well, I think if you read the book, you'll spend more time in the neighborhood of those thoughts.

MAN: Is it a useful book?

BRIAN: I -- don't know. It's useful for writing other books.

MAN: Man, I'm caring about this topic a lot more than I should... well, back to middle age for me!

By now, you've turned around to see him as he walks over to his own table.

You come over to Brian's table.

YOU: Mind if I sit here?

BRIAN: Yes -- go right ahead.

YOU: I see your hair is dry. But you don't have an umbrella that I can see. Did you wear a hat?

BRIAN: Yeah, here it is.

He shows you the hat.

YOU: What do you hope to get out of studying philosophy?

BRIAN: I don't know. On days like today, I don't think I'm getting anything out of anything. I guess that itself is a philosophical topic.

YOU: Feeling nihilistic?

BRIAN: My heart is not nihilistic today, but the rest of me is. No, not my will. My will pushes against the nothing.

YOU: Yeah, rainy days can get to you after a while. At least the reservoirs will get more water.

BRIAN: I don't know if it's rainy weather that does it. I don't know if there's any meaning to meaningless feelings.

YOU: When I have those feelings, I want there to be something objective for me to believe in. Some thing outside the world of feelings. Because the meaningless feelings say that they are all there is. You know what I mean?

BRIAN: Yeah, I do. I wish I knew more things objectively.

YOU: You put a lot of things into your head...

BRIAN: But it seems like I end up knowing less. The more possibilities you see, the harder it is to choose just one. Maybe that's my problem. I stay in the intellectual world so much that I can't know anything. If I was active, my limitation would be all the things I wanted to change in the world. But, to be honest, I don't want to change things in the world. I've thought about this many times, and I want to want to change things in the world, but I have no natural desire to do so. So the only thing to do is to keep studying philosophy.

YOU: Yeah, you can't do much about necessity.

BRIAN: That's a philosophical topic...

YOU: Does philosophy connect you with God?

BRIAN: Yeah, it's weird, yes and no. Once I come to understand, or discover, some new thought about God, after an hour or maybe a day, I can no longer believe it. But the process of thinking itself is my connection with God. I used to go to church, but now my whole faith is just me thinking.

YOU: What about how you treat other people?

BRIAN: That's me getting out of the way so that I can think.

YOU: You get out of their way...

BRIAN: Yeah, it's ethical and religious at the same time.

YOU: I like that. You're like a monk.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's true, I am. It's a weird life that I kind of burrowed down into.

YOU: Don't apologize for it. The world we live in needs more people who aren't interested in it.

BRIAN: Why is that?

YOU: The world could get a big head, think it's all that, if nobody ignored it.

BRIAN: Huh, I guess that makes sense.

YOU: You know me as an atheist, right?

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess so. I don't know if I know you at all, but I know that that's how you've identified.

YOU: Right. Well, I'm still an atheist. But, I was with an old friend the other day, and, I think I had a religious experience. On a jetski.

BRIAN: Oh wow, I haven't ridden on a jetski since I was in high school.

YOU: I know. It was an experience.

BRIAN: But you're still an atheist?

YOU: Yeah, the experience left me...

BRIAN: But you might want something objective.

YOU: I would like something objective, on a rainy day like this.

BRIAN: I've got some good philosophy for you. It sounds like you had a meaningful experience, and meaning can only come from God.

YOU: Do you believe that?

BRIAN: I want to, but I don't.

YOU: Because it doesn't add up philosophically? How does your argument work?

BRIAN: If something speaks to you, it has to be capable of communicating. What was the meaningful thing? Was it the person you were with?

YOU: No, it was the whole moment.

BRIAN: So then, how could all those things come together into meaning for you?

YOU: In my brain, I guess. I created the meaning.

BRIAN: But then the moment itself wasn't what was meaningful, full of meaning.

YOU: Maybe "that spoke to me" and "meaningful" are metaphors.

BRIAN: But you connected with a reality outside yourself.

YOU: Yeah. That's true, I definitely did.

BRIAN: And that reality was the whole moment.

YOU: Yeah, that's true. So I guess God could speak a whole moment to me?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's the idea.

YOU: It's certainly a beautiful thought.

BRIAN: But you don't believe, and I don't believe.

YOU: No, I think I can feel the belief from that experience coming back. It's like a shift in the wind.

BRIAN: But is it something objective?

YOU: I don't know. It's real, though. I think it really exists, even if it's not objective.

BRIAN: That's an interesting thought.

YOU: The thing is, can it help with the terror of death.

BRIAN: You feel that too?

YOU: Not all the time. And when I get caught up in something, like talking, or believing, like right now, I don't feel it as much.

BRIAN: Because God is speaking to you.

YOU: Yeah, but when I think that God is speaking to me, the words kind of die inside me.

BRIAN: Yeah, same here.

YOU: Huh. Well, maybe I'll have another experience like at the reservoir.

BRIAN: You could go out in the rain and get blown around.

YOU: Get my feet wet...

BRIAN: Some kind of surprise, some kind of risk. The stakes for existence go up, and you get more interested in existence, open up to it more, trust it more. And so then it means more to you.

YOU: But I'm not going skydiving.

BRIAN: Yeah, you don't have to go skydiving. I doubt that skydiving would be as meaningful as getting surprised by the wind while walking out on a rainy day. The skydiving is such an industrial form of risk-taking.

YOU: But if I had to jump out of a plane that was going down...

BRIAN: That would be very meaningful and not something you would ever want to do again. A very unique event. And I think uniqueness makes things real.

YOU: That sounds true.

BRIAN: But skydiving will always be meaningful on a different level. I think everything we perceive conveys meaning. Even static on a TV screen.

YOU: You remember static?

BRIAN: I do remember.

YOU: I forget about younger people sometimes, what they've experienced.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's fine. It doesn't come up that much between us.

YOU: That's true.

BRIAN: (yawns) I'm tired but it's not late at all.

YOU: Some days are like that for me, too.

BRIAN: I think I haven't been moving around enough.

YOU: Yeah, that can help. I went out for a walk before I came here.

Julia enters the cafe.

JULIA: I'm wet!

She is.

Her hair is, at least. She must have dashed from the cafe's parking lot to the door.

She orders an iced Vietnamese coffee, talks to Joe the barista, gets the coffee, and comes over to sit with you and Brian.

JULIA: I love the rain!

BRIAN: What do you love about it?

JULIA: Are you going to turn this into philosophy?

BRIAN: It probably would have turned out that way. But we can avoid the general, invisible world if you want. Just talk about your experiences.

JULIA: I love how it makes puddles in the street, and how it cleans the air. And how it makes the rooftops *thunder*.

BRIAN: It puts some energy into you.

JULIA: It does! When I was a teenager, I used to go outside in the first rain of the season and dance around.

BRIAN: So did I.

JULIA: You can dance?

BRIAN: No, but I did.

JULIA: Beth, did you do that when you were a teenager?

YOU: No, I stayed inside.

JULIA: Did you live in the Wonderland when you were growing up?

YOU: No, I moved here as an adult.

JULIA: Okay, that's the reason.

YOU: Yeah, I came from somewhere where it rained more often. So it wasn't as special.

JULIA: Isn't it weird how the past fades? If we could remember our laughter in 20 years, we would be cut to the heart.

BRIAN: Yes.... wait, is that a quote from something?

JULIA: No, but it should be. I was being a playwright.

BRIAN: But you weren't being a realistic playwright. That wasn't realistic dialogue.

JULIA: But it came from the heart. Maybe I should be a playwright.

YOU: Is that your past right now?

JULIA: No. My past is that I was a cashier at the grocery store for 12 years and then I was unemployed for 10 months. I'm still pretty young.

BRIAN: But you could have been a playwright?

JULIA: No, I could never be a playwright.

BRIAN: Did you hate your life?

JULIA: No. Would you hate that kind of life? How do you afford your philosophical lifestyle? Do you have a job?

BRIAN: My parents died and left me some money, and I live simply.

JULIA: Don't you want a job?

BRIAN: Yes, I do. But I have no interest for it. I'm low on interest in things.

JULIA: You're a philosopher, yeah? That makes sense. You're trapped doing the thing you love, forced to be who you are.

BRIAN: You're being a playwright again.

JULIA: And why not? If I speak the lines of plays, memorize them, drink them into my brain, why can't I be a playwright? I am an actor, but I become a writer. O Brian, take my hand and let yon rain be ours tonight!

BRIAN: What's happening to you?

You see something strange and eternal in Julia's eyes.

JULIA: I get connected to strange things sometimes. I don't always understand what they are.

YOU: I was telling Brian about the other day when I went to the reservoir and rode around on a jetski with my friend.

JULIA: And it was something like that?

YOU: Yeah, it was.

JULIA: Something is moving. Maybe it's the universe.

YOU: Maybe it's a playwright, speaking our lines to us.

BRIAN: Do you believe in fate?

YOU: I do. I don't want to, but I do.

BRIAN: What are we doing inside this cafe?

JULIA: I don't want to die...

YOU: I think we are caught up in something...

JULIA: Maybe Joe can help us...

JOE: Yeah, what's up?

JULIA: Joe, come over here and make sure we aren't hypnotizing each

other.

JOE: Now, I don't know anything about hypnosis, ma'am.

JULIA: Stop pretending, Joe, everyone knows about hypnosis in this town.

JOE: Ma'am, have you been drinking?

JULIA: Only as prescribed!

You and Brian are beginning to get some air and look at each other in a bewildered way.

JOE: I'm going to have to cut you off.

JULIA: One more drink!

JOE: No, ma'am, that's final.

He slams the table.

And the spell is broken.

JOE: Ha, that was fun, that was like an acting scene, right?

JULIA: Ha ha (forcedly) yeah!

JOE: Man, that was some improv!

He goes back behind the counter.

JULIA: (in a lower voice, fully out of Joe's earshot) Oh God. He doesn't realize it, because his past changed right when he hit the table. But during that scene he was in it as much as I was.

BRIAN: You can see people's pasts change?

JULIA: Once you've seen both sides of something, you get new eyes.

YOU: Are you okay? You look.... haunted.

JULIA: These things come and go.

You gently touch her shoulder and feel her relax a little.

YOU: What kind of universe do we live in?

JULIA: It happens. The universe guides us, speaks to us, and makes everything happen to us.

Your hand returns.

BRIAN: Are you hungry?

JULIA: Yes, how did you guess? Oh, because you were hungry, right. Beth, you're hungry, too?

You can see Joe snacking as she speaks.

YOU: Should we order food here or go somewhere else?

JULIA: I think we should stay hungry.

BRIAN: Why do you say that?

JULIA: I don't know why, but it's the right thing to do.

You all understand without understanding, and sit quietly,
looking through the cafe windows at the cars getting through
the rain.

BRIAN: Sometimes I wonder about the nature of reality. I guess you do too, Julia.

JULIA: Yeah, but from a different angle than you do.

"Silence for half an hour"

Or for less time...

You breathe, at first to calm down, and then just to breathe
and then you forget that you breathe, as you speak.

YOU: That playwright, where do they get their inspiration?

BRIAN: The one that was speaking through us?

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: I don't know. Maybe there's some kind of important project they're working on, and that forces them to make moves in the world.

JULIA: These things don't have a purpose.

BRIAN: Maybe they're just displays of power?

JULIA: I used to like power, but I don't like it the older I get.

BRIAN: Have you ever had a weird feeling that was definitely you feeling weird?

JULIA: Yes. It's different than how that felt, but similar.

BRIAN: Maybe the playwright has weird feelings and it comes out in what they have us say. Maybe weird feelings are a property of being a creative person.

JULIA: Now you're talking philosophy!

YOU: So it's like they're sharing their life with us...

BRIAN: Yeah. That could be.

JULIA: So are we talking about God now? What about the universe? Can we make a theory for that?

BRIAN: Maybe the universe produces random psychic forces which play out in our personal beings.

JULIA: That sounds more like it. I think the universe explains this better than God does.

BRIAN: Does that mean God doesn't exist?

JULIA: You tell me, philosopher! Are we flirting?

BRIAN: We certainly have chemistry.

JULIA: Okay, yeah. Chemistry. That's okay. I can always find a date.

YOU: Brian, how does meaning play into this?

JULIA: Meaning?

BRIAN: We were talking about some thoughts I've been having about meaning, before you came in.

JULIA: What kind of thoughts?

BRIAN: Mainly about how meaning is something spoken by God. God speaks meaning and his body is what we find meaningful. God's body is what he speaks, and everything we perceive is part of God's body.

JULIA: So my body is part of God's body?

BRIAN: All of you is. God speaks each of us to each other.

JULIA: So then, the universe could be something spoken by God.

BRIAN: Right, and then it would be meaningful.

JULIA: What if the universe was personal? Could it be meaningful by itself?

BRIAN: If the universe was personal, then it would be God.

JULIA: So maybe God and the universe are the same thing...

YOU: The question is, what is the character of the universe, if the universe is personal? How does that compare to the character of God?

BRIAN: Yeah, if the universe is something spoken by God, maybe God has a different personality than what the universe makes it seem like.

JULIA: Like, his body is messed up?

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: So then how do you know anything about him?

BRIAN: He feels our pain, because he speaks it to us. He endures us instead of shutting us all down. I think he loves us.

YOU: So, what is love?

JULIA: That's a good question. When I was younger, I thought I knew, but now, I still think I know, but I know I could be wrong about that.

BRIAN: Maybe the experience we had was God's desire for intimacy, expressed through his broken body.

JULIA: That's a theory.

YOU: Yeah. That's quite a theory.

JOE: Guys, I've been listening in to your story a little (pardon my dropping of the eaves!) and I think I can speak on behalf of Mitzi's and say, have some cookies. You all have been through a lot.

He gives each of you a chocolate chip cookie.

JULIA: Should we break our fast?

YOU: What do you think, Brian?

BRIAN: No, let's wait a while.

YOU: Okay.

JULIA: Okay.

And you sit and wonder what to do. No board game is appropriate, and no words come. Joe leaves you alone, and other patrons enter the cafe. You look at the art on the walls and out at the traffic going by in the street, at the people walking past. And then slowly the moment shifts and you three enter a new context, and shift and enter a new context

after that, and shift in your seats.

BRIAN: Now do we eat?

JULIA: Okay.

YOU: Okay.

You eat the cookies, washing them down with the remains of your drinks.

A car honks outside, and the rain begins to let up.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 4 "Brian"

Written 15 February 2019

Released 15 February 2023

COMMENTS

1.

BRIAN: But you connected with a reality outside yourself.

YOU: Yeah. That's true, I definitely did.

BRIAN: And that reality was the whole moment.

YOU: Yeah, that's true. So I guess God could speak a whole moment to me?

Beth is thinking quickly and filling in gaps in Brian's argument. To expand: A moment speaks to you because it is part of a speaker. Really it is a speaker who is speaking to you, through all the things that speak to you. What you experience of each person are their phenomena, which are part of God's body. The moment itself doesn't necessarily have its own independent intellect, yet it speaks, as it is a part of God who contains it and speaks it.

Episode 5 - "Angela"

"He looked at himself in the mirror, conscious"

"He looked at himself in the mirror, fully conscious that he"

"He looked at himself in the mirror, fully conscious, living in himself, living in his pain."

First sentence.

"He was fully conscious of his pain. He was struck by his pain. His"

"He was fully conscious of his pain. He was struck by his pain. His pain was present to him. He wondered if there was something outside"

"He wondered if there was something outside his life. Maybe he could"

"Maybe he would be happy, but maybe he wouldn't, if something was different"

"Maybe he would be happy, but maybe he wouldn't, if something in him was different, if he could be otherwise than himself."

"Was there a God? If there was a God, maybe there was a reason for him to be himself."

"She came in and said hello. 'I'm here to change your life' she said."

"'No', he"

"'Okay', he said, 'you can change me.'"

"'Thank you', she said."

You don't know where to go from here in your short story. Or, you don't know, maybe it's a novel. You get the sense that it's

a short story, though, and that's okay.

You're sitting here at Mitzi's Cafe, trying to get some inspiration. You wish that there was someone here for you to talk to, like an old friend. Old friends bring you news from a different world, and it's nice to catch up. The people you see every other day are nice, but old friends always seem to be having good things happen in their lives.

You decide to get up and go outside and go back to...

YOUR APARTMENT

Your studio is minimally furnished, with some pictures on the wall. Your bed is a futon which is currently folded up. The bathroom door is propped open to let the bathroom air out.

There is nothing to do here.

OUTSIDE

You go out onto the street, not really knowing what to do. Then you think, why not take the bus somewhere?

So you wait at the bus stop for the 40 bus, which goes a long way. You'll know what to do by the time it gets to the end of the line, you think.

Standing there is a woman, who likes what you're wearing.

WOMAN: Those shoes are really cute! Where did you get them?

YOU: I ordered them online. They're fair trade shoes from Ethiopia.

WOMAN: Wow. The fabric is really interesting. It looks different from different angles.

YOU: Yeah. Your shirt is cool, too.

WOMAN: Thank you! I painted it myself.

YOU: Are you an artist?

WOMAN: I was when I was younger. I'm Angela, by the way.

She extends a hand which you grasp.

YOU: I'm Beth.

ANGELA: Where are you headed?

YOU: I'm just trying to clear my head, so I'm going for a bus ride.

ANGELA: I do that kind of thing too. I'm headed all the way out to the train station. I've got a trip to take.

YOU: Vacation?

ANGELA: I have to visit my parents. My dad isn't doing too well.

YOU: That's too bad.

ANGELA: It's a good thing I can go.

YOU: Yeah.

ANGELA: So, what's occupying your mind?

YOU: Just, existing. Getting through time. I was working on a short story, but nothing was clicking.

ANGELA: Yeah, why do we live, anyway?

YOU: I know. Anything on your mind?

ANGELA: Yeah. Yeah, a lot of things.

She continues.

ANGELA: I don't know, I guess it's probably stuff that I shouldn't share with strangers I just met.

YOU: Yeah, that's okay.

ANGELA: So, what do you do for a living?

YOU: I'm an editor.

ANGELA: Oh I see, you like to write...

YOU: So I'm an editor, yeah...

ANGELA: How do you like that job?

YOU: It's alright. It kind of makes me swim through time. How about you? What do you do for a living?

ANGELA: Oh, here's the bus...

You both get on, pay, and sit next to each other.

ANGELA: Okay, here we are... I'm an administrator for a non-profit... not

in charge, but still an administrator.

YOU: What does the non-profit do?

ANGELA: We help at-risk youth. We have a tutoring program and do educational things. We do classes on nutrition, exercise, and teach psychological skills. Have you heard of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy?

YOU: No, what's that?

ANGELA: It's a therapy based on teaching skills like emotional regulation and mindfulness.

YOU: Okay, that sounds really nice.

ANGELA: Yeah, we give classes based on that. We want kids to have a good foundation.

YOU: That's really neat.

ANGELA: Yes. It's a rewarding job.

YOU: Sometimes I wish I could do something like that, that really makes a difference. But something in me won't go there.

ANGELA: Yeah, I can understand that. Some things speak to you, and some things don't.

YOU: And it's strange, because I think young people need help, and I want to help.

ANGELA: But it's just not you.

YOU: But it could be, right?

ANGELA: It could be, but only if it speaks to you. If it doesn't speak to you, leave it alone.

YOU: I guess I get tempted to engineer myself, to fit a certain image. But what if that image is a good thing? What if we could all respond to what the world really needs? Wouldn't that be good?

ANGELA: Yeah. But that's not the way things are. Hey, if you're a writer, you must know something about how to write? And you're an editor...

YOU: Yeah, that's true.

ANGELA: Here (she rummages) here's my card. And what's your phone number?

You rummage and reply with your card.

YOU: Here's mine.

ANGELA: We both have business cards!

YOU: Absolutely.

ANGELA: We need volunteers to be tutors all the time, and you could help with writing skills.

YOU: Yes, that would be interesting.

ANGELA: Okay, great.

You sit in silence. The bus speakers call out the stop. The bus stops, someone gets on, someone gets off. The bus starts up again.

ANGELA: Okay, so I know I just met you but I like your energy. So I can tell you this. What's on my mind is that I broke up with my boyfriend recently.

YOU: Wow, that's hard. But it was your decision, so it's a good thing, from your perspective.

ANGELA: Yeah, it was a good decision. He wasn't the worst boyfriend, just, not emotionally satisfying.

YOU: Yeah, I guess you had to dump him.

ANGELA: Yeah. I've been thinking over it, over and over. For some reason, this won't leave me. "Not emotionally satisfying"... what kind of person am I? I've been in abusive relationships before... not the worst kind of abuse, but still, abusive. And after crawling out of those relationships, what did I do? I went straight back into the game, looking for more men. I have a hunger for men. I crave men to fulfill my emotional needs. I devour them. And when they can't give me my supply, I get rid of them, always hungry.

YOU: But if you're hungry, what are you going to do otherwise, starve? Can you avoid all human contact? You're going to want to consume somebody.

ANGELA: I would even consume the people on the bus. This conversation would lead to another and another and I'd consume you, automatically. Well, I'm hopeful that realizing this, I can come to some kind of understanding.

YOU: Does this pattern affect your work?

ANGELA: Not really. At work, I'm living for other people. Really living. And I'm happier there. But when I get off work, I relax and my hunger takes over. And I get in relationships. And I live for my partners and friends. But it's really about what I consume.

YOU: I don't feel like you're consuming me right now.

ANGELA: I'm not. But if we stayed friends, down the line, looking back, we would both see that the seeds started here.

YOU: Okay. So you consume people. Do you have any hope?

ANGELA: I like that response. I grew up in a Christian household, and one story that I didn't understand when I was little was about how Jesus saw the woman at the well and said "It's true that you have no husband. You've had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband." And he offered her living water. You see me, better than most. The men in my life are addicted to me as much as I am to them, so they can't see me as a person. The women in my life say nice things to me, nicer than you do. But I want someone like Jesus to come into my life and say "You're an addict, you're insatiable, you fake love in order to get your supply. What you say is true." Because I know it's true, and I want to hear the truth about me. Even if there's nothing I can do to be better, I want to hear the truth. Your response was good. I do consume people. I want people to see me for who I am, and really see how messed up the way I am really is, and accept me, and not be fake about it. And maybe that's my hope. I don't think I can stop consuming people like food. I don't have any hope of that. But I can hope that someone will tell the truth. And you did tell the truth.

YOU: Is there any way to reduce the damage that you do?

ANGELA: Maybe. One idea I have is to find a better man to "love" (she marks with air quotes) A tough man, with his head together. Again, someone like Jesus. God, you would think I should go to church or something...

YOU: You think you could find a man like Jesus at a church?

ANGELA: You know, I don't think Christians are even trying to be like Jesus most of the time. That's not their gospel.

YOU: I don't know... well, if that's true, what are you going to do?

ANGELA: Keep eating people. Keep seeing my therapist.

YOU: Your therapist helps you but they don't really help you.

ANGELA: Yeah.

YOU: Well, if you want we can wait together.

ANGELA: Okay, but very quietly, because we're here on the bus.

You put your arm over her shoulder and lean toward her, and she leans toward you. You both tear up. You go back to how you were.

ANGELA: You fed me just now.

YOU: I knew I was feeding you.

ANGELA: I'm sorry.

You look at her eyes.

ANGELA: God, Beth, where have you been all my life?

YOU: I don't know, this is a really weird situation.

No one on the bus takes any notice.

ANGELA: It's okay. There was something different that time.

YOU: What?

ANGELA: I don't know why it was different. My emotional hunger craves people's flesh, and their sunshine, the sunshine of their faces. But also craves how they see me, and what they say I am. And it craves them, as a thought object, something to lovingly caress. Did you know that I've dated three men who were more than 10 years younger than me? I'm too old to have kids of my own. I doted on them. They were my precious, beautiful boys. One of them was one of the abusers. I craved children, I craved youth. I craved the sunshine of their youth, the beauty of them.

YOU: I'm about the same age as you.

ANGELA: 45?

YOU: 41.

ANGELA: Bless you. God bless you.

YOU: Why?

ANGELA: Today there was something. I get my supply through human interactions, through the reflection and revelation of human personalities. Supposedly those are about communication. But there's never really any communication. My heart doesn't want communication. It wants anything but communication. Healing, joy, pleasure, excitement, purpose. No communication.

YOU: Did I communicate?

ANGELA: You were there, but something else communicated to me. It's always communicating, but today I was open to it.

YOU: Do you think it was God?

ANGELA: I don't trust myself enough to think that. To let Jesus save me. I

don't know if I can ever believe in God.

YOU: Okay, whatever it was, somebody spoke to you.

ANGELA: Yes. If it spoke to me, it was somebody.

YOU: I'm just trying to figure out God, too.

ANGELA: You can't figure out God, you can never know him. Then you'll want to feed on him.

YOU: Maybe that's why he's so distant. Hey, my friend was telling me about George Berkeley. He was a philosopher from a long time ago. He said that everything we perceive is spoken to us by God.

ANGELA: So it's like we're living in the Matrix?

YOU: Right, but God is everywhere, in every perception. So if that's true, what kind of God do you see right now, when you look out the window of the bus? What kind of God would speak all that visual detail to you?

Angela tries the thought on.

ANGELA: He's... really quiet.

YOU: Can you feed on him?

ANGELA: No... I can't... but he's there.

YOU: Maybe that's how you see God. You're so hungry that you can only be given him in ways that don't feed you.

ANGELA: Are you sure you don't believe in God?

YOU: I think to be honest, I'm an atheist right now. But I could be wrong.

ANGELA: So you're an agnostic?

YOU: It feels more like I'm an atheist who could be wrong than an agnostic who is right in her agnostic position.

ANGELA: Okay, I can see the difference. So God helps us by not existing?

YOU: Right. But we can still think about him.

ANGELA: I think he does exist, because we can think about him.

YOU: Are you going to feed on him that way?

ANGELA: No, he's just an idea. He's irrelevant to my well-being.

YOU: How does that make you feel?

ANGELA: I don't know, I'm not sure I feel anything right now. I'm just

okay. Huh, maybe this is the Holy Spirit.

YOU: The Holy Spirit?

ANGELA: In Christianity, he's one of the persons of God, and he indwells people. I thought the Holy Spirit was a spirit of power. But maybe God's not all about power, and maybe healing comes from the word of God and not through his power.

YOU: Do you want to go to church now?

ANGELA: Right now? I have to catch my train.

And soon the bus arrives at the stop near the train station.

You get off and walk with her over to the platform. She buys her ticket from the kiosk.

ANGELA: Beth. How lucky we were to meet. I think the universe put us together. Not God, he's powerless. And the universe has no personality. So that way I can't feed on either of them. I don't know where your travels are going to take you. I don't know if I'll feel comfortable calling you in to do tutoring for the kids. Maybe you'll find a different opportunity. Maybe I'll change my mind.

YOU: We don't have to be friends. You can keep this moment as a moment.

ANGELA: Yes. Thank you.

You give each other a side hug, and then you walk away, wondering about the meaning of life -- not wondering if it had any at all, but wondering what the message of it was saying to you, specifically.

You go back to the street where the bus stop was, cross to the other side, wait at the stop headed home, get on at the right time, and ride, ride, ride.

You get off and go sit down in Mitzi's Cafe. You're a cafe rat. Julia sees you.

JULIA: Hey! How are you?

YOU: Hi Julia. I'm just processing things.

JULIA: What happened?

YOU: I couldn't focus, so I went on a bus ride to nowhere.

JULIA: To nowhere? Bus people do that?

YOU: We do. If you have a month pass, why not?

JULIA: Yeah... and your month pass costs as much as gas does these days... Maybe I should quit driving...

YOU: Public transportation has its downsides.

JULIA: Okay, but we were focusing on your emotions.

YOU: Thanks. So I met this woman at the bus stop. She was nice. She told me about a volunteer opportunity through her work. And then we didn't have anything to say, and she started talking about her relational hunger. She said she went out with a lot of men and had a lot of friends just to consume them emotionally, to feed her.

JULIA: Wow.

YOU: And I comforted her, and it was kind of strange.

JULIA: Like what kind of strange?

YOU: Do you ever have weird moments with strangers?

JULIA: Yeah... it happens a lot. Sometimes I'm the weird thing, and sometimes they're the weird thing.

YOU: I think in this case, she had something she really had to say, but there's no one on earth who can hear it, so I heard it.

JULIA: Okay, I think I know what you're talking about.

YOU: And then we got off the bus. She had to take the train somewhere.

JULIA: So, do we consume each other emotionally?

YOU: No, I don't think we do.

JULIA: I agree. I don't know why that is. I think we're just people to each other.

YOU: We do have chemistry.

JULIA: But it's light and sparkling.

YOU: I think maybe we're just in a different place than her.

JULIA: I used to consume people a lot. I think I still do. But right here? No way.

YOU: How lucky we are to know each other.

JULIA: Yeah...

YOU: So how is the dating going?

JULIA: It's always first dates.

YOU: Is that disappointing?

JULIA: No, because it's all first dates with the same man. I'm still dating Jackson, but his name was something else originally, and he has a different name now.

YOU: I guess that keeps you from consuming him.

JULIA: Yeah. I just consume him a little. You can't consume someone too much on a first date -- even if you want to. The dynamic hasn't evolved yet.

YOU: We know way too much about dynamics.

JULIA: Yeah. Life is too short and life is too long. Too short -- I'm 30 and I want to be a mother some day. And I have to figure out which name of my man I want to marry. I don't want my kids to have a different man every Friday night be their father.

YOU: You're thinking ahead. When I was your age, I didn't think about these things.

JULIA: How old are you again?

YOU: 41.

JULIA: You don't have much time left.

YOU: Yeah. At this point, I'm okay with not having kids.

JULIA: What about a husband? Or a boyfriend?

YOU: I'm not sure. I guess I'm okay with one or without one.

JULIA: Wow, you're really chill.

YOU: I'm lucky. I experience the same things everyone does, even the extreme things, but less so at the same time.

JULIA: You are lucky. Well, my life is just weird.

YOU: Yes. Your life is weird.

JULIA: Thank you for validating my point of view.

YOU: You're welcome. Scrabble?

JULIA: Of course.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
Episode 5 "Angela"
Written 16 February 2019
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COMMENTS

1. I used to have a pair of shoes from SoleRebels that had an interesting weave to it. SoleRebels is a fair trade brand from Ethiopia.

I got into fair trade some time ago and now I'm wondering if it's the best way to spend my money. For what I spend on fair trade clothes and shoes, I could buy the cheap, conventional versions and donate the difference to an effective charity. In principle, I would rather support the norm of "clothes should not be made in a sweatshop" instead of "it's okay for clothes to be made in a sweatshop if the wealth produced is enough to make up for poverty somewhere else". But thinking in a utilitarian way (adding up harms and benefits objectively), maybe buying conventional clothes and donating "does more good" in the short run, maybe a lot more good.

I do think that supporting entrepreneurs who are nationals of developing countries is a good idea. That way the profits stay in country. SoleRebels was founded by an Ethiopian woman. In theory, at least, she should have a better grasp of Ethiopian issues than an outside philanthropist. She has more of a stake in Ethiopia, as a citizen and not just as a businessperson or philanthropist.

Which norm is more exportable? That is, which can be spread to the most other people? How livable is it? Fair trade involves work, to find something to wear, but the benchmark is simple. You have to buy a certain amount of clothes in a year, so you have to give a certain amount. If you buy conventional clothes, it's easy, and you might conveniently forget to donate enough to make up the difference. Fair trade is the norm that we would want in the ideal future on earth. The end state of society is everyone paying a fair amount for clothes, not everyone exploiting a few people and then giving the difference to people who are worse off. So from a perspective of implementing a cultural change that starts now and continues for generations to the final sustainable society, fair trade involves less change, and may be better for that. It may be an easier standard to actually keep yourself to, and may make more sense intuitively.

This all is thinking long term. Do we know the future? Is there time? Also, can we do calculations of good correctly? What is "good"? What is human well-being? A heuristic that I tend to use in different parts of life is to diversify and resist change. It's arguably less rational, but also less prone to me betting too much on the wrong thing that looks obviously right right

now. So I might continue to buy fair trade sometimes, and sometimes not, sometimes donate instead.

Fair trade purchasing, like charitable giving, can be done well or poorly.

ACT II

Episode 6 - "Camping"

Your eyes open and you see the sun on your tent. Julia lies sleeping next to you in her sleeping bag. It's getting warm in here. You hit the moment where it's time to move.

Your legs ache from yesterday's hike, your feet with the skin of blisters. You get up and dress in the tent, feeling your unwashed skin itch, feeling every minute of your 9 hours asleep last night.

You shake Julia awake, and she sort of opens her eyes and goes back to sleep. You decide to let her sleep some more. Who knows how much sleep another person needs?

You unzip the tent, taking your shoes out to the ground cover outside, and get your feet into them, tying them securely. You zip up the tent and walk past a few conifers to where Brian is, making breakfast. You three are...

CAMPING IN THE MOUNTAINS

(Waiting for Margot, episode 6)

The campsite has a grill (encrusted with a black substance), a fire pit, a wooden picnic table, and a place to park or be dropped off. You three were dropped off by a camp shuttle, and every so often the camping service comes by, and if you're there, you can talk about how things are going. If you need to go home early, that's how you'll have to do it. But you're probably not going to have to go home early, or want to.

Somewhere not too far away is a pit toilet, but fortunately it's not close enough for you to smell it. And there are trees everywhere, and underbrush, and the day is warm and dry and you're feeling the freshness of being awake, and the

feeling that you're fading out and dehydrated, already, so early in the day. It's a dry day, and you can smell smoke from somebody else's fire. It's a beautiful place.

Brian is cooking rice over a propane stove. He has a couple cans of beans waiting, and some salsa he made himself before coming up here.

YOU: Brian, good morning.

BRIAN: Good morning. Is Julia still asleep?

YOU: Yes, I think so. That's how I left her.

BRIAN: I had a good time this morning.

YOU: You're an early riser, aren't you?

BRIAN: I've gotten into the habit, and it's hard to break. So I got up around dawn and went for a walk. I saw some interesting birds. I even saw a mountain quail.

YOU: Are those rare?

BRIAN: Yeah, they're considered rare. But it just looked like a bird to me. But a particular kind of bird.

YOU: It just looked like a mountain quail.

BRIAN: Yeah. The bird ran off into the brush.

YOU: Why do you get up early?

BRIAN: I like to read the Bible and meditate.

YOU: What kind of meditation?

BRIAN: Just a centering prayer, a kind of measured breathing.

YOU: When I'm up on the mountain, I don't really feel any closer to God.

BRIAN: Do you feel closer to the universe?

YOU: No, but it's nice being on the mountain.

BRIAN: I don't feel any closer to God on the mountain either. But I do feel different.

Julia barges in.

JULIA: How can you guys not feel close to the universe up here? It's everywhere!

BRIAN: I think that might be the problem. The universe is always everywhere. It's as present in the times when you feel far from it as when you feel close.

JULIA: Okay, that makes sense. But why do I feel closer to it here?

BRIAN: We feel close to things when we trust them.

JULIA: Yes. That makes sense. Thank you, teacher.

BRIAN: You're welcome. Would you like to try some salsa? I made it myself. Here,

He offers a bag of chips from last night. She selects one, and dips it in the salsa, and eats.

JULIA: Wow... um, it's kind of... different.

BRIAN: It is different. Do you think you'll want some on your rice and beans?

JULIA: That's what's for breakfast?

BRIAN: That's what I'm making.

JULIA: I think plain will be fine.

Now you're curious.

BRIAN: Here, try some, Beth.

You make your test. The flavors in the salsa are fine, there's nothing wrong with any of them individually, and the salsa doesn't exactly taste bad, but it doesn't taste good either. Somehow, it just tastes like itself.

YOU: Yeah, Brian, this is... different.

BRIAN: You think you'll want some on your rice and beans?

YOU: Yeah, I think I'll give it a try.

BRIAN: Everything's different when you're camping.

YOU: Do you make that salsa when you're back at home?

BRIAN: Not too often. If I have a lot of peppers from my pepper plants, sometimes I make it.

JULIA: You have pepper plants?

BRIAN: Yeah, they're potted plants. I have a south window and so, I leave

the blinds open and they get enough sun.

JULIA: Wow, sometime we should visit your apartment. I bet it looks like a monastery.

BRIAN: It does.

JULIA: By which I mean pretty much like everyone's apartment.

BRIAN: The late industrial age is the age of mass monasticism...

JULIA: And also the age of constant partying...

YOU: And of total normality...

JULIA: High fives, everyone. High fives for the chemistry.

High fives all around.

BRIAN: That was some good chemistry.

He checks to see if the rice is done.

BRIAN: Looks good. Get your bowl and we can eat.

You and Julia get your plastic bowls and Brian serves some rice. You two get spoons while he opens a can of beans. He pours beans over your rice, then opens another can of beans, pours half of it over his.

BRIAN: We're going to have to finish off these beans.

No worries, you think, there's enough hunger between the three of us.

Brian spoons some salsa on his rice and beans, and you do the same. You all sit down at the wooden picnic table.

JULIA: Do you pray over your food, Brian?

BRIAN: I was going to pray silently.

JULIA: You were going to pray to God.

YOU: Would you like to pray to the Universe, instead?

JULIA: Offer gratitude, yes.

YOU: How about this. I'm an atheist. So I will create a powerful silence, and make space for reality.

The other two accept. You will an intense silence into the space where the three of you are. There is no room for hallowedness, gratitude, or awe. You don't understand where this silence comes from, or where it is going.

BRIAN: Wow.

JULIA: Beth, you have... some kind of power.

YOU: I don't think that was me...

JULIA: Maybe it was the Universe...

YOU: Did you feel the Universe during that silence?

JULIA: No, I didn't. But it must have been there. The Universe is always there, in everything.

YOU: Brian, was there God in that silence?

BRIAN: Yes, there was God in that silence. That's the only time I've felt God's presence on this mountain.

JULIA: The trees don't speak God's presence to you?

By now you are eating rice and beans, having a breakfast conversation.

BRIAN: I can only sense the presence of God when he comes near to me.

JULIA: But he's here all the time, right? He speaks the universe into existence, that's what you said earlier, right?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's true. I guess he's everywhere.

JULIA: Maybe God was in the silence, but the Universe wasn't.

YOU: But we all experienced our bodies and the air and the sounds in the woods while the silence came through me. That's the Universe.

JULIA: I hear what you're saying, Beth. But the Universe wasn't here, in the silence.

YOU: I agree, but I don't understand why.

You all fall silent. Eating rice and beans is not a difficult task, and soon you are done.

You all clean up, and then decide what to do with your day. You decide to hike over to the agricultural preserve.

AGRICULTURAL PRESERVE

You all walk down a road with a field fenced-in beside it.
Workers are out in the fields, tending the grapevines that fill
in the purpose of the tract of land. The sky is clear.

You remember something.

YOU: Oh, we forgot to put on sunscreen. Hold on.

You get out the sunscreen and start to put some on and pass it
around.

BRIAN: Thanks for remembering.

YOU: I didn't really try to remember, so I'm not sure how much thanks I
deserve.

BRIAN: Well, you kept living up until now. Was that easy?

YOU: Sometimes it was hard, yes.

JULIA: Well, there's your thanks. Thanks for making it this far in life.

YOU: I only did what anyone else would have done under the
circumstances.

JULIA: Okay fine. You don't deserve anything at all, spoilsport. But when
we all don't have sunburns later, it'll be because of you, and there's
nothing you can do about it.

YOU: You're right, Julia. I am being a spoilsport. You can thank me if you
want.

JULIA: Yes, I like thanking people. It makes me feel good inside.

BRIAN: Ah, Julia, you missed a spot.

JULIA: Where? On my nose?

BRIAN: You got it.

JULIA: We're so funny, caring about how we look up here on the
mountain. We're camping!

YOU: It's the editor's instincts. When I'm writing an email, I can't help but
fix problems in it. Even if I'm writing to a friend who doesn't care.

JULIA: Interesting. So if someone is a certain way and it bothers us, we
want to fix them.

BRIAN: Make them perfect.

JULIA: If we couldn't edit them would it bother us if they were the way they were?

BRIAN: A long time ago, no one used deodorant, because it hadn't been invented. Were people in great misery, shunning each other, unable to love each other? Or did they just get over the smell?

JULIA: I don't know, Brian, have you ever taken the bus? There are some painful smells on the bus.

BRIAN: Yeah, so the truth hides in the middle.

YOU: I think there must be some kind of instinct for perfection. It's not always a rational thing.

BRIAN: Yeah, I think I agree.

Julia notices someone in the vines.

JULIA: Hello!

WORKER: Oh hey, how are all you?

JULIA: We're camping!

WORKER: Better than "great"?

He stands up straight, taking this as opportunity to rest.

JULIA: Just different. Camping is its own thing.

WORKER: When I take my vacations, I go down to the city. That's its own thing.

JULIA: I know what you mean. Everything is different and we go from place to place. Do you like your job?

WORKER: Eh, it's okay. It beats being stuck inside.

JULIA: I've done some farm work. I like being outside!

WORKER: Yeah! Well, I have to get back to work. You all have a nice day.

YOU: Thanks, we will.

You all continue on down the road.

BRIAN: I wonder sometimes. What will things look like in thirty years?

YOU: The scientists predict the Calamity.

BRIAN: Our prophets -- we don't want to hear what they have to say.

YOU: Yeah. I guess it'll be the end.

JULIA: What are you guys talking about? I don't check the news.

BRIAN: You're wise.

JULIA: Maybe not. Maybe I'm stupid. I bet I'll be alive when the Calamity comes.

BRIAN: Hopefully.

JULIA: So, I want to be prepared. What can I do?

BRIAN: I think we're doing the right thing.

JULIA: Going camping?

BRIAN: Yeah, going camping, hanging out, that's the right thing to do. No one knows exactly how the Calamity is going to play out. We don't even know when it's coming. It's hard to know anything too specific to do. But one thing that makes hard times more liveable is when people can trust each other.

JULIA: I guess I can trust you two... better than a lot of people.

BRIAN: It may be that we're lucky, and don't have to work to become trustworthy for each other.

JULIA: I don't remember having to work at all.

YOU: I think we all worked, really hard, just by surviving to the point we met each other.

BRIAN: So if I know you, I can trust you. And the way to know things is to spend time together.

JULIA: Are you suggesting we make a pact?

BRIAN: What do you mean?

JULIA: Like, I don't know, a covenant, Bible scholar.

BRIAN: What would be in this pact that you propose, Julia?

JULIA: If things go to hell -- not just Hellscape Wonderland hell, but *real* hell, we will stick together.

YOU: Wow, I'm not sure I feel how momentous this is. I just want to say "yes" casually.

JULIA: That's okay.

BRIAN: Yeah, you can say "yes" casually and then take what you say seriously.

YOU: I guess I can grow into it.

JULIA: That's the spirit. Such enthusiasm!

You feel a little shut down.

BRIAN: She's okay, Julia.

JULIA: I know, I was just yanking her chain. I've been enough people to have been her.

BRIAN: Why are you hard on her?

JULIA: I'm teasing her. She's so old. Old people are ridiculous.

BRIAN: That should fill you with sorrow, Julia, to be so unfortunate as to be better than her.

JULIA: I've been older than her. She's just being a 41 year old. And she's better than me.

YOU: No, I'm not better than you. And I'm not worse. I am myself.

JULIA: Huh. You're yourself.

BRIAN: She's Beth.

JULIA: What does "Beth" mean, Beth?

YOU: I don't know. I know what the name means in general, but I don't know what the name means in my case.

JULIA: You don't know who you are.

YOU: No, it's like that Augustine quote about time.

JULIA: How does that go?

YOU: Do you remember, Brian?

BRIAN: It was something about knowing what time is until it's time to define it.

YOU: So, I know who I am, but I can't even define myself.

JULIA: Okay, then why not give you a hard time?

YOU: I don't know.

JULIA: Are we still friends?

YOU: Yes.

JULIA: Chemistry! We are *so* good!

You all ascend to the surface, and see the sky.

BRIAN: Huh, I think I see thunderclouds in the distance.

YOU: Uh oh, maybe we should head back.

JULIA: Yeah, that's a good idea.

You turn back and see the fields, remarking on what you see in them.

BRIAN: One thing that will always be relevant is agriculture.

JULIA: What if we became hunter-gatherers?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's true, we might even lose agriculture from the Calamity.

JULIA: But yeah, I see your point. We always have to be able to get food.

BRIAN: Another skill is being able to be hungry and not be too unhappy.

JULIA: That's a skill?

BRIAN: Yeah, you have to learn how to be happy and also hungry.

JULIA: So how can people be happy? By going camping?

BRIAN: We have to learn how to be happy in the city too. We can't afford to be sad.

JULIA: But maybe we can practice being tough when we have a lot of food by being hard on ourselves. And then when it comes time to be hungry, we can stop being as hard on ourselves. And our lives will still be tough.

BRIAN: Sounds like a plan.

JULIA: Is that part of the pact?

BRIAN: Yeah, sure.

JULIA: Are you in on the pact?

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: Such enthusiasm! Wow!

BRIAN: Yeah, I'm in.

JULIA: So how do you want to be hard on yourself?

BRIAN: I like thinking. So maybe I can think really hard.

YOU: I can work harder and use the money to help prepare for the

Calamity.

JULIA: Excellent. I wonder what I'll do?

YOU: Is your life easy?

JULIA: You know, now that you mention it, no.

YOU: So you're tough enough.

JULIA: Yeah, I don't know how I could handle anything being worse.

YOU: You have to figure out a way to become strong.

JULIA: How do I do that? Do you go tell a plant in a garden, "Figure out a way to grow into a big, strong plant?" While people are tearing up the soil all the time?

BRIAN: We can help you, but maybe you need to be under the protection of someone else. I notice that you didn't take your first date up here on the mountain.

JULIA: Yeah, it would have turned into a second date up here, as much time as we're up here...

BRIAN: And that's how romance works for you, the first date thing?

JULIA: Yeah, someday he'll become just one person... but I don't know how long it will be until then.

BRIAN: So maybe there's someone else out there. Not romance, and not us. If you were a believer, I would say that you should join a church or something like that.

JULIA: I am a believer. I believe in the Universe.

BRIAN: Okay, maybe you can find people like that. Or maybe you can be adopted by a family.

JULIA: I like that last one. But it's hard to find a family.

BRIAN: Okay, well, over time, things will work out.

JULIA: Brian! You're being encouraging!

BRIAN: Oh, sorry, I'm so sorry.

You soon enough arrive back at your campsite, with thunder in the wind. You put everything where it can't get wet, and wait by the fire, for the first drops of rain.

And they start to come, and you retire to your tents, which keep off the rain.

INSIDE THAT LITTLE TENT

You and Julia can hear the drops coming thicker, setting up a sound on the roof.

JULIA: Beth, do you believe in God?

YOU: I think I'm an atheist.

JULIA: But you're not sure.

YOU: Sometimes I feel like my life has meaning. How is that possible without God?

JULIA: Like that stuff Brian talks about?

YOU: I don't know if it's Brian's thing about things needing to be spoken to us by God because, how does he put it?

JULIA: I know what you're talking about.

YOU: There's some kind of technical reason why meaning could only be spoken by God, yeah, that sort of makes sense, but it doesn't really convince me. No, it's just that, somehow, things meaning something just feels like God exists.

JULIA: So it's not a rational thing.

YOU: No, it's not. And I want everything to be rational.

JULIA: But is it rational when you hear the rain hitting the tent? Bam! No time to be rational or irrational.

YOU: You're right. Well, meaning could always be an illusion that we create ourselves.

JULIA: Do you really believe that?

YOU: No.

JULIA: Maybe you're an agnostic.

YOU: Yeah. Maybe I'm just holding onto my atheism. Like the church people who go to church but are really agnostics.

JULIA: Do you believe in atheism?

YOU: You mean, beyond just thinking God doesn't exist, like take that belief and trust it itself?

JULIA: Yeah. That's a good way to put it. Once you trust something enough to think it's true, then you can trust it even more.

YOU: And you can trust something as an idea even if you don't think it's true.

JULIA: Yeah, so do you trust atheism?

YOU: I'm into atheism because it's the truth. But I don't have anything against believing in God. I just don't want to believe in something that isn't true.

JULIA: You just have to trust sometimes.

YOU: Yeah, but there's different kinds of trust. I can trust up to a point, but I need to hear something from God before I believe he exists.

JULIA: I guess I've always believed in the Universe since I was a little girl. So I don't know where you're coming from.

YOU: What about in all those lives you've lived? Has there been one like mine?

JULIA: Yeah, for some reason... no. There are limits to my empathy.

YOU: You look so sad.

You give her a hug. She brightens.

JULIA: This rain won't let up! Let's lie back and I'll tell you a story.

So you lie back and relax for a half minute, and then Julia begins to speak.

JULIA: Once, I was a scared girl living in the city. I was waiting during the rain at a bus stop. A drunk woman sat down next to me under the shelter. There was a bar right next to the bus stop. She was talking about something and then she put her hands around my neck. I can't remember why, just the feeling of her hands around my neck. It flowed from the conversation somehow. And I just sat there, and felt completely fine. This woman could have choked me, but I knew she wouldn't.

YOU: But you were a scared girl back then?

JULIA: Yes, but while she had her hands around my neck, I felt fine.

YOU: What happened next?

JULIA: She took her hands off my neck and finished her story. Then I caught the bus.

YOU: That's it?

JULIA: That's it.

And then the rain lets up. You two get out and so does Brian. Somehow all the walking and talking got you back in the afternoon and now it is evening. You are starving. Time for dinner: rice and beans.

BRIAN: We're preparing for the Calamity. Rice and beans are cheap.

You sit around the fire, and then go to bed for real, late at night, deep in the night: your watch says 11 PM.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 6 "Camping"

Written 14 March 2019

Released 14 March 2023

COMMENTS

1. Mountain quail aren't really rare, but they're shy.
2. In our world, things which might resemble "Calamities" may warrant more specific preparation in addition to finding people whom we can trust.

Episode 7 - "Returning"

You get your stuff all packed up and sit at the picnic table, up here in the mountains, last day of camping, time to go home.

There's nothing to do but wait for the shuttle to come by for you, so you sit and play cards, something that doesn't require too much thought, as dehydrated as you all are despite how much water you've been drinking. It's the late afternoon and you and Brian and Julia are tired, too much beauty, too much afternoon.

Then you hear a van lumber around the corner into view. It is...

THE SHUTTLE

The shuttle is white and kind of old and your gut registers before your eyes do that it has scratch marks on the side. It is a big van and should have space for all your belongings as well as for all of you. The shuttle parks.

(Waiting for Margot, episode seven...)

The driver gets out and helps you get your things into the trunk of the van. You can see the backs of the heads of two people sitting in the middle back seat, a woman and a man. They turn their heads and greet you.

YOU: Hello.

MAN: We're headed down the mountain, too.

YOU: Great!

You go to get more things and they let you go. Soon you and your friends are done loading the van, and you get in. Brian sits in the front passenger seat, and Julia sits in the back seat. You sit in the middle seat, next to the woman. All the doors shut, all the people buckled in, the driver starts the engine and begins the journey down the mountain.

WOMAN: Hi, my name is Tricia.

YOU: I'm Beth.

TRICIA: "Beth", that's an older name, isn't it?

YOU: Yeah, I was named after my great-aunt.

TRICIA: It's nice.

MAN: Hi, I'm Mark.

YOU: Hi.

MARK: We're on our honeymoon.

YOU: Oh, nice.

MARK: Yeah, we're headed down to the H. W. to see the sights. Can't wait to sleep in a real bed.

YOU: You remember that one comic strip where the dad says, something like, "we suffer for a week during our vacation so that the rest of our lives can feel like luxury"?

MARK: No, I don't.

YOU: It was from this one comic strip, I don't remember the name of it...

TRICIA: I think I know what you're talking about. It was the one with the family, right? The mom, the dad, the brother, and the sister?

YOU: No, I think the boy was an only child.

TRICIA: Well anyway, camping was very nice. I couldn't feel the way I did up there if I stayed down in the city. But I'm a city person.

YOU: Yeah, I guess that's reality.

MARK: You guys are friends?

YOU: Yeah, we're all friends. We came up to get away from the city for a little bit. Try to get out of the routine.

MARK: Routine will get you any day.

TRICIA: It gets you every day!

They laugh and you also laugh.

MARK: Well, we had a good time. We saw the waterfall.

YOU: The waterfall?

MARK: Yeah, on the north side of the meadow, if you go up into the hills for a few miles, there's a waterfall.

TRICIA: It's gorgeous.

MARK: There are ferns growing beside it. And a pool of clear water.

TRICIA: It's not the biggest waterfall.

MARK: But it's nice.

YOU: Wow, it does sound nice. I guess that's something to check out the next time we're up here.

Saying "we" makes you think of Julia and Brian. Brian is talking to the driver about something. You can't hear what they're saying over the air conditioning and road noise. You look back at Julia and she is lying down on the seat, asleep already.

TRICIA: I could use a nap myself.

MARK: I could use a shower.

YOU: People didn't used to take showers every day.

MARK: I know. I was one of them.

TRICIA: When was that?

MARK: I had a period in my early twenties where I just decided not to take showers all the time.

TRICIA: Why not?

MARK: I don't remember anymore. Probably to prove some kind of point.

TRICIA: Yeah, you're always trying to prove points.

Mark looks kind of annoyed, but he passes over it real fast.
You notice but maybe Tricia doesn't, and you wonder what
kinds of things these people will go through before they learn
to really respect each other.

MARK: Well, eventually I got over that phase. So now I could be a normal person again.

TRICIA: Thank goodness.

She kisses him on the cheek.

MARK: Being normal is a good thing.

TRICIA: Don't be too normal, though.

MARK: Of course not. I'll always be weird in the ways you like.

TRICIA: You don't have to be a certain way for me.

MARK: No, but I *want* to be a certain way for you.

They nuzzle. You feel at peace, the peaceful feeling when you
know you're safe.

YOU: Where did you have the wedding ceremony, if you don't mind me asking?

MARK: Not at all.

TRICIA: It was *so* nice. We had a beach wedding down in Cove Park in Sunset City.

YOU: Is that where you're from?

TRICIA: Yes.

YOU: Oh, so not too far from here.

TRICIA: Four hours, depending on traffic.

YOU: I go to Sunset City once in a while.

MARK: It's kind of a sleepy place. So for a change, we go to where the action is.

YOU: Yeah, I guess maybe if I got married, I might go to Sunset City for my honeymoon.

TRICIA: You're not married? I guess that makes sense, since you're camping with friends.

MARK: How do you know the guy in the shotgun seat isn't her husband?

TRICIA: He, uh, doesn't look like husband material.

MARK: Whoa, Trish, that was a bit much.

TRICIA: No, I mean, I don't mean that, I don't mean he's not a good guy. He's definitely boyfriend material. But men look different when they're the kind of men who can be married.

MARK: Do I look different?

TRICIA: You've been looking different.

YOU: Yeah, maybe he and I don't have the right kind of chemistry.

There's no hint that Brian has heard you over the air conditioning and the road noise.

TRICIA: Yeah. You can see it on people's faces when they're in a relationship, Mark.

MARK: Right, right, Tricia, as usual.

TRICIA: Hey, I'm not always right!

MARK: Name one time you weren't right.

TRICIA: Well... uh....

MARK: See? Can't think of anything, can you?

This all is said in some kind of jest.

TRICIA: Oh, okay, I admit it, I'm always right.

Mark and Tricia hold hands, having come back together after a wild vortex of argumentation. You look out the window at the trees that pass by. You feel slightly motion sick, but you know you'll be fine in the end.

Mark and Tricia talk about something in a quieter voice, something they don't feel like you need to hear, and you disengage from trying to understand them. You look out the window.

The shuttle comes out of the trees, passes through a meadow. The road is straight for a ways and then goes over a saddle, back into the trees, and as it descends, it winds its way back and forth, and the shuttle follows in its pattern, and you feel just a little bit motion sick, but you'll be fine in the end.

MARK: So what do you do for a living, Beth?

YOU: I'm a freelance editor.

MARK: What's that like?

YOU: Well, the easy part is doing the work. The harder part is getting the work.

MARK: Where do you get your work from?

YOU: A lot of it is repeat customers and word of mouth by now.

MARK: But getting started?

YOU: I went out to cafes and struck up conversations. Went to networking events with other professionals. Had a few clients who were people I knew from the past.

MARK: And you managed to find enough customers to be able to do it full time?

YOU: I was working other jobs at first, just doing editing on the side, until I had enough clients. But yeah, it feels like luck that I've been able to find people.

MARK: You just have to keep trying different things until something works.

YOU: Yeah. How about you? What do you do?

MARK: I'm a pastor. Not the lead pastor, but also not a youth pastor. Just a regular pastor.

YOU: Oh, like an associate pastor?

MARK: I think that might be my title.

YOU: What do you do in that job?

TRICIA: He just hangs out.

MARK: Right, I meet with people, to talk about how God is working in their lives. Also, on weeks where I'm supposed to preach, I prepare sermons. And then I preach!

Brian and the driver had been silent. Interested in Mark's conversation, Brian craned around to talk back.

BRIAN: Do you ever help people run errands?

MARK: Excuse me?

BRIAN: My uncle was a pastor and that's all he did.

MARK: No, not really. Our church is big enough that I don't have to do that. Where was your uncle a pastor?

BRIAN: Right on the edge of a rich neighborhood and a poor neighborhood.

MARK: That might explain it. No, usually I just help counsel people. Sometimes they call me up when they have problems. But just to talk.

BRIAN: It's interesting that we don't carry each other's financial burdens or run errands for each other.

MARK: Yeah, that is interesting.

Brian turns back toward the road ahead to rest his neck, then cranes back.

BRIAN: Yeah, we get so self-sufficient when we all have money.

MARK: So it's kind of a good thing that we still have spiritual and emotional problems. Otherwise we wouldn't love each other at all. Is that what you're saying?

BRIAN: Basically, yeah.

TRICIA: I think you're missing something... what's your name again?

BRIAN: Brian, no we weren't introduced.

TRICIA: Brian. No, people can love each other when there aren't any problems.

MARK: But if people didn't have problems, I'd be out of a job.

TRICIA: And then that would become your problem, and someone would have to help you with that. See? Everything works out.

She kisses him on the cheek.

TRICIA: Brian, you look young. But someday maybe you'll be a father and everything will make sense. Little kids have to learn how to grow up. Every year millions of children turn two and learn to say "no". Every year a bunch of children turn thirteen and discover the opposite sex. Mothers and fathers will always have important work to do.

BRIAN: That makes sense, but it supports my point. We'll never completely get rid of problems, but if we did, we would be unable to love people.

TRICIA: No, we *would* love people. Do you know how much satisfaction people get out of seeing people be happy?

BRIAN: I don't. I only get satisfaction out of helping people.

TRICIA: So you're the problem. You need to learn to be happy when other people are happy.

MARK: Trish! Go easy on him!

TRICIA: Sorry, but it just bothers me when I see talented people not doing what they need to do to help other people.

YOU: I don't believe in God, but you do, I think. I wonder, if God existed, what would God want?

TRICIA: He would definitely want people to help each other.

BRIAN: Right, that's what I'm saying, and we're going to get to a place where there's no one to help, except for children.

TRICIA: People need help all throughout their lives.

BRIAN: But not as much help as they used to.

TRICIA: Are you saying people don't need help anymore? There are millions of people living on the streets and starving. There are lonely people, aching people.

DRIVER: Everything good back there?

The driver is the authority and you know it.

YOU: It's okay.

DRIVER: Okay, keep it down, I need to be able to drive.

BRIAN (keeping it down): No, I'm not saying people don't need help. But they need less help, and so we can get in a state where we don't love other people as much, because we don't have to love them.

TRICIA (also keeping it down): And I'm saying that we can't help people as much as possible if we think they have to have problems for us to love them.

MARK: (also keeping it down): I can see your point, Trish, but also Brian's point. A lot of what gets me out of bed in the morning is the ability to help people. I know I don't really engage with reality as much when there isn't some kind of problem.

TRICIA (not keeping it down as much): Who cares about engaging with reality? Would you put your own psychological state above the interests of other people's happiness? Not if you're really selfless.

MARK (keeping it down): Tricia, I don't know, where's God in all of this, like what Beth said?

TRICIA (keeping it down -- contained): In Revelation, it says that God will wipe away everyone's tears. So there you go. When God gets his way, there's no more problems.

MARK (keeping it down -- also contained): Yeah, that's true.

BRIAN (keeping it down): But think about this. God is the Father, right?

They can all keep it down now, something having changed in the air.

MARK: Right.

BRIAN: And the Bible says he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, right?

MARK: Right... Oh. I see what you're saying....

BRIAN: So in Revelation, when the wicked are in hell...

TRICIA: Oh God. Dear God.

She's praying, or about to pray.

BRIAN: So there is no perfect happiness.

MARK: I never thought of that before.

Tricia looks like she's seen a ghost.

MARK: Maybe... nobody really goes to hell.

BRIAN: Maybe. That's not what the Bible says, though.

MARK: Yeah. Huh.

TRICIA: Are you a Christian, Brian?

BRIAN: I don't know. Maybe. I do believe in God.

TRICIA: What do you think? Does anyone go to hell?

BRIAN: I think the only reason for us to live lives of suffering and fakeness is because we have to learn to be real ourselves, through our own decisions. Our hearts have to change, and that's completely up to us. So I think there are people who will choose to hate God forever -- refuse to listen to him. Or at least, there's no guarantee that there won't be those kind of people.

TRICIA: But God's love is powerful.

BRIAN: Well, if God could overcome all of us so that we would love him, we wouldn't have to go through this life, would we?

TRICIA: Maybe we're all going to be saved, but there's a process to it that has to take time.

BRIAN: What kind of church do you go to?

TRICIA: It's an evangelical church.

BRIAN: So you believe in the Bible.

TRICIA: Yes.

BRIAN: The Bible says not everyone will be saved.

TRICIA: But it also says women should wear head coverings in church. And we don't do that.

MARK: Tricia, that's a cultural thing. What Brian is talking about is a salvation issue.

BRIAN: There's something in what she said, though. Do either of you really live like other people go to hell?

A pause.

MARK: We both try to build up the kingdom of Christ. But... if I have to be honest, no.

BRIAN: People are just annoying, or pleasing, in their spiritual and emotional states? Nothing more, nothing less?

TRICIA: Where do people like you come from, Brian? Who are you?

BRIAN: I don't come from the same place as most people, no.

MARK: If I have to be honest, Brian, yeah, there's nothing life or death

about anything in anyone else's life.

BRIAN: How about you, Tricia?

TRICIA: This must be a guy thing.

BRIAN: What do you mean?

TRICIA: Being unable to care about other people.

BRIAN: You care, then.

TRICIA: Everything is life or death.

BRIAN: Do you think anyone goes to hell?

TRICIA: No, I think... I think everyone *should* go to heaven. That's what God really wants.

BRIAN: So then, what's there that's life or death?

TRICIA: Like if someone has cancer.

BRIAN: So physical things can be life or death.

TRICIA: If someone is suffering. They can't see outside of their own moment. So there's no heaven for them.

BRIAN: What if someone is fake?

TRICIA: WHO CARES?

DRIVER: Hey, cut it out.

TRICIA: Who cares about reality? Who cares about love? Does any of that matter? If you were a real person, if you really loved, then you wouldn't need that. You would just want people to not suffer.

BRIAN: Have you ever met someone who was more real than you?

TRICIA: No. What is this "reality" thing you're talking about?

BRIAN: Like someone you respected but didn't know why you respected. Someone who felt solid to you.

TRICIA: Yeah, okay, I think I know what you're talking about. Someone with integrity.

BRIAN: Right. And have you ever been that person to someone else.

She thinks.

TRICIA: Yeah, yeah I have.

BRIAN: I've been in both positions, myself. And there were times when the

more real person couldn't handle me. And I didn't understand why, and I thought they were being unfair to me. And then I was with someone who thought I was amazing, and they didn't understand what they were doing to me. So I just left, and I understood what the first person went through.

TRICIA: Insensitive people can't understand more sensitive people. Yeah.

BRIAN: So if we're going to be with God for eternity, he has to teach us how to be in tune with him, right?

MARK: Oh... wait... so this explains why it's so important for people to have a relationship with God...

TRICIA: Oh yeah... People can be really good, but they don't know how to be good... we don't even know what goodness is.

BRIAN: We know, but we don't. Our eyes aren't opened yet.

TRICIA: So God is going to get us through this process. None of us are going to hell.

BRIAN: Does God always win?

TRICIA: No. That's what makes him a good God. A God who always won wouldn't have died on the cross for our sins.

MARK: And yeah, if you think about it, God put up with a lot in the Old Testament. Think about all the times he gets angry at Israel and then suddenly switches to being tender with them.

TRICIA: Yeah, it's like Israel has the real power in the relationship.

BRIAN: God keeps using his muscle on them, but he keeps having to use his muscle on them. Yeah. Interesting.

You've been quiet for a while. The shuttle is now entering the outside suburbs of the city you call home. Your motion sickness is a quieter presence, but your headache has grown. The sun is low enough that the driver has his shade down, but Brian, craned, hasn't noticed, and sun comes through his side.

YOU: Brian, it's kind of warm in here, could you put your shade down?

Brian complies.

Julia wakes up. She looks around.

JULIA: Hey, we're getting into the city.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: I could hear you guys talking in my dream. A lot of religious stuff.

YOU: Do you want a synopsis of what we've talked about, to see if it lines up with what was in the dream?

JULIA: It was something about how some people are going to hell. Brian was saying that. He was wearing a lab coat. Is it true, Brian? You believe some people are going to hell?

BRIAN: What I really believe is that the six of us are in this shuttle, and we're in the suburbs, getting further in, that I'm tired and I'm saying what I'm saying.

JULIA: Okay, yeah, same here.

BRIAN: So it's like anything I say about God is what I want to be true of God. So I'd be a really bad person if I said that people go to hell. Because no one really knows. All we've got is how we feel and extensions of how we feel in the moment.

JULIA: Yeah. So the real question is, which feeling of how we feel in the moment is the right one?

BRIAN: There's the one that goes along with feeling that we have to have everyone be okay in the end, that there's perfect happiness, that tragedy is unacceptable. And there's the one that goes along with the feeling that it's impossible to make everyone be okay in the end, that there is no perfect happiness, that tragedy is inevitable.

JULIA: Huh. It seems like both positions are kind of messed up. In this shuttle, it feels like everything is fine.

YOU: I have a headache.

JULIA: Yeah, everything's fine except for headaches. Easily solved, right? You just get some fresh air and relax and you'll be okay.

YOU: Yeah, I think that'll work with this headache.

JULIA: Things are basically fine, Beth?

YOU: Yeah, I just have a headache, it's not like I can't deal with that.

JULIA: So there's no question to us, as we really are. As we really are, right here, we're all fine. We don't need anyone to be okay in the end, because in our reality, where we really live, we're all okay. And no one is going to hell, either. So whatever we say, whatever position we take, is us trying to argue. And it sure seemed like you guys were arguing, in my dream.

MARK: Don't you believe in reality outside the moment?

JULIA: Yeah, I guess, sometimes. But honestly? No. Even if I'm wrong, I

really just believe in my own feelings and my own moments.

MARK: Interesting.

TRICIA: God created a whole world.

MARK: Yeah. What does God say about all this?

JULIA: Can God be present in a moment, in the reality inside the shuttle?

BRIAN: I wonder that sometimes. I think sometimes he is. Remember that time when we all went crazy together? Like we were in a play.

JULIA: Oh yeah, definitely.

BRIAN: That was God's power, in a moment.

JULIA: Okay yeah. It was the Universe's power, and God's power. In the moment it's the same.

BRIAN: Oh yeah, you're right.

JULIA: We'll have to remember that.

BRIAN: Maybe we will.

JULIA: So God can be present in a moment.

BRIAN: But maybe not in this moment. And this is all we can speak of, what we really know.

The shuttle has made its way to where the buildings are taller. You can see the Hell Hills approaching.

TRICIA: I think tragedy does matter, in the moment.

JULIA: Yeah?

TRICIA: I think if everyone has to be okay in the end, and you're on the side of making that happen, you have to win. You can't lose, because you have no place for tragedy in your life. And you can do some really messed up things when you have to win.

MARK: So that's why we argue, because there's no place for tragedy in life.

JULIA: Arguing and fighting can be good things.

MARK: You're not going to argue with us or fight with us, are you? You three aren't that kind of person.

TRICIA: What are you talking about? Brian was arguing with me.

BRIAN: Yeah. Well, what is the answer, after all?

TRICIA: I don't know. But I think true wisdom is beyond answers. You don't understand it, but you trust it.

MARK: Amen.

TRICIA: Do you think we'll remember any of this in a week?

MARK: I hope so.

DRIVER: Hey guys, it looks like there's going to be a good sunset with the way the clouds are. You want to stop on one of the Hell Hills and watch it go down?

MARK: Sure, we can check in a little later.

YOU: Yeah, that sounds good. Julia or Brian, is that a problem?

BRIAN: No.

JULIA: No.

You sit quietly and Mark and Tricia murmur to each other. The driver drives up Second Hill and parks alongside the road. You all get out. You can feel the sea breeze and banks of clouds fill the sky. You are quiet, and Mark and Tricia murmur to each other and are quiet. The sun lowers itself fully into the clouds. Everything is lit up. In the world of the senses, there is the sound of the breeze and the traffic going by, but in the world of the spirit, there is perfect silence.

No one can break that silence, except the driver.

DRIVER: Okay, I have to get going, gotta get the van back.

The sun isn't finished going down, but you know that there will be another day to see the sunset.

The driver drops off Mark and Tricia at their hotel, then Julia and Brian and finally you.

YOU: Thanks for the ride!

DRIVER: No problem. Life is a journey and a moment.

YOU: That's a beautiful thing to say.

DRIVER: It's how you get through the day.

He's helping you get your stuff out of the back of the van.

YOU: Yeah, I guess so. Well, hopefully we're living in reality.

DRIVER: I hope so too. Good night!

The sun is all the way down.

YOU: Good night!

He drives away.

You open the door to your apartment, and get to putting things away.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 7 "Returning"

Written 19 March 2019

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COMMENTS

(no comments)

Episode 8 - "Shopping"

You are full of energy today, so you decide to go to the cafe first and have some tea, and then go out and get something done. Maybe you'll get some shopping done. You don't know. Your days, which are like caramel mixing with chocolate, or lostness mixing with lostness, aren't about knowing or planning. Today you don't mind, because you are free.

You get your bag for going shopping. You could use a new shirt, or a new pair of slacks. No laptop today. You walk, thinking about the woman from some time ago named Angela, thinking about how you could help tutor kids through her program. Your mind is very much of this world, of this city.

Soon you make it to the door of Mitzi's Cafe, and step inside...

(waiting for margot ep. 8 -- starring YOU as EVERYONE.)

Julia and Brian greet you when they notice you, and you set your bag down at their table. They're playing Scrabble. Julia has just played PAT. You go over and order your lemongrass tea. The barista, a new person named Erin, puts the loose leaves (or stalks?) in a bag, pours scalding-hot water in the cup that will be yours, and immerses the bag in the water. Then she hands you the cup and you return to your friends.

You sit down and Brian plays APATHY.

YOU: "Apathy", that's funny. Today I feel like the opposite.

BRIAN: Yeah. I feel kind of apathetic.

JULIA: How does that feel for you?

BRIAN: I don't know. It's kind of hard to talk about. I guess it's like, there's nothing to do. There's no world out there.

JULIA: But there is a world.

BRIAN: Name one place in the world.

JULIA: The Hell Hills, where we saw the sunset after we went camping.

BRIAN: Name two places.

JULIA: The place we went camping.

BRIAN: What was it called?

JULIA: I guess... I don't remember...

BRIAN: You see what I mean?

YOU: It's weird, but you're right. The world barely exists to me too now.

BRIAN: So yeah, I care a lot. But there's nothing left to care about.

JULIA: We must be under some kind of delusion.

BRIAN: But how do we get out? Can we care our way out of it?

JULIA: I think we have to stop being ourselves. It's our only hope.

YOU: But if we stop being ourselves, then what? What's the point of living if you can't be yourself?

BRIAN: I think if we stop being ourselves, then we can adjust to the reality outside ourselves.

JULIA: And not being ourselves is a choice we can make... boy, I wish that were true.

YOU: I think being myself has been the main thing that made me a good person.

BRIAN: Same here. But paradoxically, now it makes us bad people.

YOU: Are we bad people?

BRIAN: I don't know. Maybe everything is as it is and will be as it will be. If there's a world outside of Mitzi's, it'll be okay. If there isn't, then nothing bad can happen to it.

YOU: No responsibility.

BRIAN: Exactly.

JULIA: What about God, Brian? Does God care?

BRIAN: God is why things are okay. Julia, what about the Universe? Does the Universe tell us things are okay?

JULIA: Yeah, but then we are smarter than the Universe sometimes, and see people in need. But not right now. Man, this is amazing.

YOU: Are we in heaven?

BRIAN: Here in Mitzi's? Has Mitzi's ever seemed like heaven to you?

YOU: No, and it doesn't seem so right now.

BRIAN: Maybe we're in hell.

JULIA: Brian, don't believers believe in an eternal life where everything's good?

BRIAN: Yes.

JULIA: Do you?

BRIAN: Usually.

JULIA: So you don't think this is it?

BRIAN: No.

JULIA: So how does heaven work? How can it be any better than this?

BRIAN: I don't know. But this is pretty good. Here we are. It's afternoon. It's golden. We're playing Scrabble. Are any of us in pain?

JULIA: No.

YOU: No.

BRIAN: So this is good. It's a beautiful day outside.

JULIA: So we're in heaven.

BRIAN: No, not at all. We're in a horrible place.

JULIA: Why?

BRIAN: Because this isn't the life God has given us.

JULIA: I don't believe in God, but I think I know what you mean. There's something empty and dead about this place, and it would still be empty and dead no matter how nice things were. Let's go outside and see if things look differently out there.

 You all go outside, conscious that the Scrabble game remains
 for you to finish. Cars pass on the avenue. People walk by.
 Julia breaks the silence.

JULIA: There's less apathy and more world. But... the apathy is still here.

BRIAN: Sometimes I go two days at a time submerged in apathy.

YOU: I feel it too.

BRIAN: And it's beautiful. It's hard to argue with.

YOU: But yeah, I'm an atheist, and the best way I can describe it is that it's not the life given by God. I'm still terrified of death sometimes, but this is also bad.

BRIAN: Well, shall we go out and save the world?

JULIA: No, not today.

BRIAN: Then, I guess we're going to go back and finish our Scrabble game.

JULIA: But that would be too depressing.

BRIAN: Ah, so for the sake of our feelings, we're going to do things differently?

YOU: Yes, Brian, we're grieving that God is not speaking our lives to us.

BRIAN: Okay, let's go for a walk.

YOU: But the walk is just going to loop around back to home.

BRIAN: Perhaps a journey to a different place?

YOU: But after the journey, we will just have to go on another journey, and soon enough going on a new journey will just be turning back to home.

BRIAN: What if we continue our productive lives, working our jobs?

YOU: That's what we already do.

BRIAN: But we could work new jobs.

YOU: The new jobs would just become new journeys.

BRIAN: So there is nothing to be done but to return and finish our Scrabble game.

JULIA: No, I still want to take a walk.

BRIAN: Okay, why not?

YOU: Sure.

BRIAN: Let's get our stuff, then.

You return, gather your belongings, and go out on the street.
Soon enough, you encounter a homeless person asking for
money. Brian roots around in his backpack and finds a dollar.

BRIAN: Here you go.

MAN: Thank you, God bless.

You walk some distance past.

BRIAN: Well, there is a world, after all.

YOU: Someday all the homeless people will have houses.

BRIAN: You have a point there. Maybe it was best that I only gave the man a dollar.

JULIA: Part of me feels like that is really horrible, but part of me understands.

YOU: Maybe it's not good to be understanding.

JULIA: What if we're the messed up, unfortunate people, and there are other people who get a big kick out of everyone being happy? So they don't need God to speak life to them.

BRIAN: Maybe God speaks life to them just in people being happy.

JULIA: So they're going to be happy someday, when we reach the end of time and everyone's happy.

BRIAN: They're going to be really happy.

JULIA: So we should just kill ourselves right in front of them.

BRIAN: Why would we do that, Julia? That's crazy!

JULIA: Because that's what they want. They want us to die so that everybody who is alive can be happy. Since we can't be happy, the logical thing to do is to commit suicide so that everybody else can have a perfect reality.

BRIAN: Julia, I think we're being childish. The only way we can truly acknowledge our inferiority is by maturing past it.

JULIA: Brian. I've always been past this inferiority. And I still long for the life spoken by God.

BRIAN: You don't believe in God, but you long for God.

JULIA: If life could be given by the Universe, I'd prefer that.

BRIAN: You don't think life could be given by the Universe?

JULIA: I need the life that is given by the truest being, whom I love.

BRIAN: Why not love the Universe?

JULIA: The Universe is real. I know that. I don't know if God is real. How do you know that God is real?

BRIAN: I've seen things.

JULIA: How do you know they weren't from the Universe?

BRIAN: They spoke to me on the level of trust. I know that there is one God above all because everything has meaning, and only God could both be meaningful and convey meaning, and convey the meaning of himself and all things.

JULIA: A speech!

BRIAN: Yes, I wanted to say that sometime.

JULIA: Brian, are you caring about something right now?

BRIAN: Yes, Julia, I am.

YOU: "On the level of trust"?

BRIAN: Intellectually, I know that God exists as one being over all because only he could speak everything to me. But it doesn't speak to me on the level of what I trust in, so I don't trust the meaning that is everywhere. But the signs that I've seen, which might be from the Universe, seem more to me like they're from God, and they speak to me in a way that makes my body trust.

JULIA: But how do you know that those experiences weren't from the

Universe? Or from many different spirits?

BRIAN: Maybe they were from many different spirits. But they were all working for God.

JULIA: Yeah, when things happen in my life that seem to be set up, it does make more sense to think that at least the spirits are all organized.

BRIAN: Yeah, the spirits are all working together, and they want me to think that God exists, and because they are so trustworthy, I can trust more, and I'm able to trust what I experience fully, and thus see that everything is spoken by God.

JULIA: But you still don't feel like this life is given by God.

BRIAN: Part of the life given by God is the parts that don't seem like they're given by God.

YOU: The parts where you can't trust life?

BRIAN: Right, some parts of life I would trust, but God doesn't let me.

YOU: It's strange, I feel a little different now...

JULIA: Me too...

BRIAN: I think the apathy's lifting.

JULIA: Beth, you don't have your laptop bag with you.

YOU: Yeah, I was going to go shopping for clothes.

JULIA: Well, here's a thrift store. Do you want to see what's here?

BRIAN: I don't need anything, so you two can go in there. I'll be back at Mitzi's.

YOU: Okay, maybe we'll head there when we're done.

JULIA: Bye!

BRIAN: Bye.

Brian walks away and you and Julia step into the store. The store has a number of racks of clothing, organized into men's, women's, and children's sections.

JULIA: What are you looking for?

YOU: A new shirt and some slacks.

JULIA: I'm not sure what I want... I'm not sure I wanted anything until I saw the opportunity.

YOU: What are we going to do with our lives, Julia?

JULIA: What do you mean?

YOU: Now that the apathy's lifted.

JULIA: I don't know. That was really weird.

You leaf through some shirts and find one you think might work.

JULIA: I like the color on that one.

YOU: It really does stand out.

JULIA: You want to be more colorful in the near future?

YOU: I think so.

JULIA: Thinking of bringing joy into somebody's life? A stranger, though, not a boyfriend.

YOU: Why not a boyfriend?

JULIA: Boyfriends want something different, something more complicated and subdued.

YOU: Brian was telling me about this philosopher named Emmanuel Levinas who said something like "uncertainty turns people on".

JULIA: Yeah, boyfriends want that. They don't want you to be a breath of fresh air.

YOU: Julia, have you ever gotten past a first date, in your life?

JULIA: No. I found the same guy and I've been dating him in different forms for my whole dating life.

YOU: Have you ever tried dating someone different?

JULIA: Yeah, and it's always the same guy.

YOU: Maybe if you dated the same guy twice, he'd be different.

JULIA: No, I tried that and he was even more the same, and the date was still a first date. And then the next time I called him, his name was different and his voice was different, but he was the same guy and we had a first date. Hey, this looks nice, and I think it's in my size.

YOU: It's different than my shirt, but it has the exact same feel to it.

JULIA: Perfect for lifting up strangers, but not boyfriends.

YOU: Because boyfriends don't want lifting up?

JULIA: Maybe sometimes they do.

YOU: I had a boyfriend once who wasn't into darkness at all.

JULIA: Did you ever have sex?

YOU: Yes, sometimes.

JULIA: Sometimes? Okay, that makes sense. Sex is all about darkness -- not necessarily evil, but darkness.

YOU: It wasn't like that for us.

JULIA: Then what was it like?

YOU: It was just... nice.

JULIA: What happened to this guy?

YOU: I don't know, we kind of lost interest in each other.

JULIA: Are you still in touch?

YOU: Sometimes.

JULIA: You should ask him out! Wearing that shirt because apparently that turns him on.

YOU: I have to try it on first.

JULIA: Oh, yes, that would be wise.

YOU: Maybe darkness is what bonds people together.

JULIA: Yeah. Mutual hunger is dark.

YOU: But sometimes you find people that you want to be with because you're not hungry for them. And I think the way to find those people would be by wearing a shirt like this.

JULIA: If you're not hungry for them, why would you seek them out? Wouldn't you at least be hungry for the lack of hunger you feel for them?

YOU: It's a different thing, you just feel the word "yes" toward someone. It's a really simple thing. Sometimes you can hunger for someone on one level and have the simple "yes" toward them on another.

JULIA: That ex-boyfriend, did you hunger for him and feel the "yes" for him?

YOU: Yes, at first. But then I got over the hunger.

JULIA: And then you drifted apart...

YOU: Yeah... Well, maybe we have to decide to be together.

JULIA: You said it, not me.

YOU: Why do you want me to be with him again?

JULIA: I don't know, I guess it's an instinct.

YOU: Yeah, maybe you want someone you like to pass on her genes.

JULIA: Or maybe I got the vibe that he would make you really happy and that would make me happy. I get selfish sometimes, craving other people to change their lives so that I can be happy.

YOU: That's interesting. What if it wasn't the life the Universe wanted them to live?

JULIA: You mean that God wanted them to live?

YOU: Yeah, I guess I really meant that.

JULIA: I don't know.

YOU: I wish I could be happy in the world where everyone was happy without God, but I can't be.

JULIA: Same here.

YOU: It's weird that we don't believe in God.

JULIA: I think maybe we do, we just don't believe he exists.

YOU: Yeah, that's weird, but it feels true.

JULIA: Maybe he does exist, I don't know.

YOU: Yeah, I've thought of myself as an agnostic before, but then I think "Honestly, I believe that God doesn't exist.", so I think I'm an atheist.

JULIA: I can be happy with everything being happy, in theory, but when I see everything happy around me, and I get each of the individual happy things in my life, like sometimes, when I have the right past, and I'm in the right moment, everything lines up, then I'm happy, but there's something in me that wants something beyond happiness.

YOU: Maybe what we want is meaning more than happiness.

JULIA: Yeah, like it's not that meaning makes us happy, but that meaning is about itself. And it does make us happy when we connect to meaning, but it's not about ourselves. Speaking of which, you seem to have a pair of slacks and a shirt, and I have a shirt, and this thrift store was not made for talking as loudly as we do when we get into things.

YOU: You're right. We should try on these clothes.

You each go to the little stalls set aside for changing and enter

and shut the respective doors. There's a full-length mirror on one wall of the stall and you change into the clothes, which fit you fine, and contemplate your image. Yes. This works. You change back into your previous clothes and step outside the stall, where Julia waits for you.

YOU: Okay, ready to go?

JULIA: Yeah.

You go to the cash register and pay for your new belongings, and then Julia does the same.

Then you walk out onto the street and head back toward Mitzi's.

YOU: I wonder what Brian will think about our shirts.

JULIA: Hm... he seems like someone who wouldn't be that impressed by them.

YOU: Do you think he's attracted to darkness, or light?

JULIA: Is it possible to prefer neither?

YOU: Yeah, I don't know about Brian.

You arrive at Mitzi's after a bit, but Brian isn't there, so you walk back out into the sunshine. Julia finds her car and you part there, and you walk back home.

You try to make sense of everything that happened that day, as you cook some dinner, listening to jazz on the radio. You eat, listening to the announcer tell the history of the song you just heard. The sun is still fairly high in the sky -- you're somewhere between spring and summer. You can't help but think of yourself living in the golden afternoon at the end of the world. Is this apathy, or is it beauty? You know that right now there are millions upon millions of hungry people. There are wars. You could do something about these problems, if you cared. But you're in a beautiful place, and you feel as though none of the starving people or the people being shot at would begrudge you this beauty. Beauty is what lets life be what it is, with all of its joy and suffering.

You clean up after dinner and clean your apartment some,

and start to thinking about what you can do with your life. What can you do about the people who starve? Maybe you can do something for those kids in Angela's program. The easy thing is just to live your life as it is, having reached this point in life. You were always a loving person, but not as loving as what the world calls for. At this point in life, your life is what it is, and it took some effort in your younger life to get it to be that way. It looked like it might not be what it was. So now that it was what it was, how could it be anything otherwise? You have to make yourself think these thoughts. Naturally, you're still suffused with the beauty of the fading evening. You want to have an internal conflict over this, but your days of ready internal conflict seem to be done. And no one begrudges you this. You are a gentle woman, with perspective on life. People like you the way you are, and you could hardly change even if you wanted to go against them.

Thinking these kinds of thoughts, you wish you had some kind of assurance that you were living the life that you were supposed to, that even the starving people were in God's hands. But it would be hard to see things that way, either. When you were young, you were afraid you would deceive yourself by believing that God would take care of everything, and you wouldn't do your part, in a world where people really do need saving by people. But now you aren't afraid of that. It might be because you yourself aren't that different from someone who puts everything in God's hands. It might be because you have learned to not fear, have gotten past that aspect of yourself, and now you can't fear even when you might wish you could fear. Or you might just not be afraid.

You get in bed with the lights off and keep thinking, and then try listening to a podcast to get away from this thinking that won't stop, but won't move you. Eventually, you become drowsy and sleep.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
Episode 8 "Shopping"
Written 17 March 2019
Released 17 March 2023

COMMENT

1. You would think that Julia would know everything, from all the pasts she's had, but she doesn't.

Episode 9 - "Selling"

You feel a strange feeling inside, a feeling which you have learned can be treated but not cured by a cup of tea at Mitzi's. So you get all of your things together in case the feeling passes and you want to browse the Internet, or read from your library book. And you go down the street to the cafe.

MITZI's CAFE

Inside Mitzi's, you don't see any of your friends, so you order your tea and sit down at an empty table. You feel empty inside, yourself, with a kind of fire. What a strange life, to feel this way for no reason. You try to think of an evolutionary reason to feel this way, but you can't, but you know there must be some reason. If you could figure out when the feeling started, then you would know why you felt this way, but you can't remember. Your emotional life is a mystery sometimes. You feel no pity for yourself, no desire to change yourself.

But the tea does some good, helps to put a lid on things.

Then Brian comes in, orders a drink, and comes to sit at your table.

BRIAN: Hey, you look odd.

YOU: I feel kind of weird. You ever have a feeling of emptiness?

BRIAN: Yeah, definitely.

YOU: And then you feel a kind of panic?

BRIAN: Yeah, sometimes.

YOU: I have to drink tea to take the edge off the panic.

BRIAN: Yeah, water helps for me.

YOU: Do any of these feelings mean anything?

BRIAN: I don't know. I hope they do. I hope they connect to something spiritual.

YOU: I do too, but I think probably they're just weird chemicals in my brain.

BRIAN: But you don't know that they aren't connected to something spiritual.

YOU: No, you're right, I don't know.

BRIAN: We never know if anything is connected to the spiritual, at least, we're not allowed to believe that.

YOU: Yeah, you get funny looks if you do.

BRIAN: Do you believe in spiritual things?

YOU: Like the deeper desires of the heart?

BRIAN: Yeah. Maybe your heart is crying out for something, and that's why you feel empty and panicked.

YOU: Yeah, I think I do believe in that. Not rationally, but personally.

BRIAN: With your heart.

YOU: With my lived life. I don't have any place for that in my worldview. But I know with my heart that science is right and that the best way to know things is through science.

BRIAN: Would it help if you believed in God?

YOU: God could exist to my heart but not exist in the world that science talks about.

A man has been overhearing.

MAN: I hate to interrupt, but I find your conversation fascinating. Are you two grad students?

BRIAN: No, but I'm kind of like a grad student.

YOU: No, I'm a freelance editor.

MAN: Hi, my name is John. I'm in sales.

BRIAN: I'm Brian.

YOU: I'm Beth.

You feel a weird feeling about the man but it's faint and you

figure you've already been feeling weird today.

JOHN: Fifty, sixty years ago, people cared about the kind of things you guys are talking about. But not anymore.

BRIAN: Really?

JOHN: Really. We're living in the end times, buddy.

BRIAN: "The love of many will grow cold."

JOHN: You got the reference! Matthew 24! Fist bump!

Brian is too polite to decline, too caught up in this association.

JOHN: I used to be into what you guys were into when I was younger. You [he means you, Beth] look like you're about my age, 40s. But Brian here must be about how old I was when I was into this stuff. Fascinating stuff! I was in grad school myself. But then, you have to go out in the real world.

BRIAN: Oh, so you got into sales?

JOHN: That's right. And the thing that I realized in sales is that none of that stuff is real. Nothing in philosophy and religion and anything is real. Except. Unless. Other people believe it. Then it's real. You can believe it all day long. It can be the truth. It can be your personal experience. But if nobody else recognizes it as real, it's a waste of your time. Brian, you look like a philosopher.

BRIAN: I guess I am, to an extent.

JOHN: Perfect answer! So do you have your own philosophy? You do, don't you?

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess I do.

JOHN: You're so young. Gosh. Well, nothing you believe is real. Unless. Someone else believes it. And. You're not going to be able to keep being a philosopher if you're surrounded by people who don't believe what you do.

He says this with a genuine note of compassion.

JOHN: If I were you, I'd find a job that pays. Get married, have kids, learn to like watching movies.

BRIAN: I already like watching movies.

JOHN: Hahahaha! Of course you do. Philosophers love movies! How could I forget? We used to watch the best movies when I would hang out with my friends in the philosophy department. *Last Year at Marienbad* -- now

that's a philosophical movie. That was from back in the day when people used to care about things the way you guys care now. Your heads are in *Last Year at Marienbad* land. But the world we live in is the sequel to *Last Year at Marienbad*.

BRIAN: How could there be a sequel to *Last Year at Marienbad*?

JOHN: That's my point! You guys get what I'm saying right? You guys are philosophers. Hey, you want me to buy anything for you guys? I better order something or else they'll kick me out! Ha ha!

BRIAN: No thanks, I'm good.

You don't say anything by way of declining but you don't have to. He goes over to order.

You and Brian sip your drinks, knowing that you are both thinking of saying things about him and wondering when he'll be out of earshot. He goes to sit at one of the outside tables, on this golden afternoon. You both know that he can't hear you.

BRIAN: Wow... that guy.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: He said some interesting things.

YOU: Yeah. The part about "even if it's personal experience, if other people don't recognize it, it isn't real". That's so true. And so messed up.

BRIAN: Yeah, I've been in situations where people didn't want to believe my reality, so they didn't, so it wasn't real.

YOU: Yeah. There are people like that out there.

BRIAN: I think I'm a magnet for them. Or I was.

YOU: Same here.

BRIAN: So philosophy and religion are about seeing what you actually see, and the real world is about seeing what everyone else sees?

YOU: Maybe. I have a regular job and I don't see what everyone else sees all the time.

BRIAN: Yeah, I think a lot of people function fine in the economy and don't see things the way everyone else does, still see things the way they see them. But maybe if they really understood the way things work, reality, then they would see things the way everyone else does?

YOU: Huh. It seems like "reality" means, "that which will get you what you want in life".

BRIAN: Not the truth as it is in itself, independent of human needs and wants.

YOU: Yeah. So if that's "reality" in the "truth as it is in itself" sense...

BRIAN: It's saying that reality is personal, that it's all about our personal needs, desires, and agendas.

YOU: So then reality would be fundamentally personal.

BRIAN: Right. And that wouldn't make any sense according to materialism.

YOU: No, it wouldn't. But the thing is, what's "realistic" is not to commit to anything because it is what it is, but because it's useful. So materialism is useful in suppressing the spiritual world, of people seeing what they really see.

BRIAN: And also in emphasizing science so that people trust in technical solutions instead of spiritual ones.

YOU: Right. But the "realistic" view isn't forced to correspond with materialism. It doesn't even have to be true. It's fine being false, as long as it has power.

BRIAN: Right.

YOU: So what can we do?

BRIAN: You could convert to theism, but... what would that do? "Realisticness" wouldn't listen to you. It can use theism just as well as it can use materialism.

YOU: Can we tell people that they should be into the truth, should really see things for themselves?

BRIAN: The funny thing is, that's the explicit message. But the effect of everyone believing whatever they see to be true is that when they argue with each other, they burn each other out, except in the ways where they all agree. And that's exactly the beliefset that that guy was talking about.

YOU: The remaining set of beliefs?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So what alternative is there to that?

BRIAN: I don't know. I would like to think that there could be one truth that we could all believe, without arguing over it, which could connect us to meaning. I'm working on my version of it, but I don't think it's likely that everyone would adopt it.

YOU: I think that there has to be something that helps people in their "realistic" lived lives in order to really make a difference. You'd better have not just the idea of God, but also a God who really speaks to people.

BRIAN: Yeah. You're right about my idea being theistic. Well, we can always wait for God to speak.

YOU: Not everyone finds that realistic.

BRIAN: That's the difference between theists and atheists. Theists are willing to keep waiting for God, for every new revelation of God. They'll wait their whole lives. And atheists have a need to connect to realistic reality, and they give up looking, and don't hear God when he speaks or would have spoken, over and over.

YOU: I don't exactly fall into either category.

BRIAN: Do you wait for God, but just haven't heard him?

YOU: Maybe. Maybe from now on I will.

BRIAN: Then, on the level of lived life, of deep trust, you are a theist.

YOU: But I don't have any evidence to believe in God.

BRIAN: But you wait for evidence. There's a philosopher, Joseph Godfrey, who says that that's what hope is, an openness to evidence. So you hope in God.

YOU: Maybe I do hope in God.

BRIAN: But you're right, you're also an atheist.

YOU: Yeah... for now.

BRIAN: An atheist... for now. Put that in your online bio.

YOU: It's funny that we think we'll believe what we believe right now, for our whole lives.

BRIAN: Lev Shestov had a bit about that. But the thing is, how can you believe without believing that what you believe is always true? You can put on your Shestov glasses and say "well, technically, it could be wrong". But if you're being honest with yourself, you believe what you believe.

YOU: Sometimes I really do wonder if what I believe is true. But yeah, I see what you're saying.

BRIAN: You have to be able to be a witness to something. People like John want to silence your witness. It's a useful thing if you're into manipulating people's minds.

YOU: Can you get by in life without manipulating other people's minds?

BRIAN: We can spend a while talking about that, but consider, do the people who manipulate other people's minds ever think about the opposite to their point of view?

YOU: Maybe to figure out how to defend theirs better. But you're right, no, they don't care, they're just interested in winning.

BRIAN: I think you can get by fine in life without manipulating other people's minds, but it takes work to make society be such that it's not necessary. And you have to do something about manipulative people.

YOU: I always just try to get away from them.

BRIAN: Yeah, but there's probably a better way than that. But, yeah, that's the best I know how to do.

YOU: Maybe you have to fight for your values and not run away. Fight for your voice.

BRIAN: Definitely. Unfortunately, the best value is one of perfect peace and leaving people in peace, and it's hard to fight for that without going against that vibe.

YOU: Maybe good isn't about being a good person, but about breaking the power of bad people, without compromising yourself.

BRIAN: That sounds both good and bad.

YOU: Yeah. I can see why Christians believed in the wrath of God.

BRIAN: The wrath of God sounds really good sometimes.

YOU: But wouldn't it be better to fight back with your own wrath?

BRIAN: It could be that, bad as the way things are is, it's even better than if people who thought they were victims went after the people who were aggressors because, a lot of the time, the victims are wrong, or wrong enough, like it would be better if they let things go a lot of the time. Not all of the time, but often enough that it's better for everyone to let things go, and some people would get victimized, than for everything to escalate.

YOU: Wait, what do you mean?

BRIAN: Like, if you're friends with someone and you think they did something wrong, you could be right, or you could be wrong. And even if you're right, you could respond in a way that makes things better, or that just makes them want to retaliate. So there's a good chance that things will just get worse if you get someone back for wrong they did to you.

YOU: But you still should get out of unhealthy relationships.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So we've been doing the best thing overall, all along.

BRIAN: Not necessarily. Because maybe we could have been doing something better to help deal with manipulateness in our culture, so that there were fewer manipulative people.

YOU: I think some people will always be manipulative.

BRIAN: Yeah, but people tend to be better people if you break their power.

YOU: Maybe that explains us. Our power is already broken, so we're good people, such as we are.

BRIAN: That "such as we are"... so humble... so broken...

You laugh, and he laughs with you.

YOU: There's no hope!

you say, smiling.

BRIAN: People like us are probably too pure to break the power of bad people.

YOU: People who speak the language of realisticness.

BRIAN: Maybe we can inspire people who do fight.

YOU: We can be mascots?

BRIAN: Yeah... no one takes beautiful people seriously.

YOU: Are you calling me beautiful?

BRIAN: It's a diagnosis, not a compliment, believe me.

YOU: I do believe you.

BRIAN: I think we're accepting our place in life.

YOU: Yeah, and that bothers me.

BRIAN: Maybe we're not good people. Maybe we need to repent.

YOU: Yes. Is there some way we can really change?

BRIAN: I don't know. But I can hope for change, for courage, strength, life.

YOU: You think that God will bring you those things?

BRIAN: Yes, God brings me many things, if I pray.

YOU: But fundamentally, this is a choice you have to make yourself, the choice to say "no" to people, to call out people. You have to see things for

yourself, in order to believe that other people shouldn't do the wrong thing, when they do it, in the moment.

BRIAN: And I make that choice by praying, and God gives me the eyes for it.

YOU: So I hope in God, and you hope in your God's appearing.

BRIAN: Yes.

You sit and finish your drinks. John gets off his cell phone and leaves his dishes on the table and gets his stuff together and walks away.

YOU: I see a hunger in his eyes.

BRIAN: Who are you talking about?

YOU: John. The man. Just now, as he walked away.

BRIAN: What kind of hunger?

YOU: I'm trying to figure it out. It could be the hunger of someone who wants blood. Or it could be the hunger of someone who wants love.

BRIAN: Simone Weil talks about the difference between "eating" and "looking". Love can be about eating someone, or looking at them.

YOU: Maybe I'm fooling myself to think that he really wants truth and love.

BRIAN: We don't know. God is powerful. And maybe it's too late for us with respect to John, but we can influence people who are younger than us?

YOU: What people younger than us? You're the youngest person I know. Do you spend time with anyone younger than you?

BRIAN: Yeah, I have a few friends who are younger than me.

YOU: Maybe you could get a job as a teacher.

BRIAN: I don't know if I could handle that.

YOU: Maybe some kind of instructor? Fewer students, fewer hours a day.

BRIAN: Maybe.

YOU: Yeah. Maybe. If it's your calling.

BRIAN: You don't believe in God, so how can there be callings?

YOU: I could be wrong about all that. But I believe what I believe.

BRIAN: Okay. Yeah, if it's my calling.

YOU: I take you seriously.

BRIAN: I take you seriously.

YOU: Even if you're beautiful.

BRIAN: Even if you're beautiful.

YOU: There, we had some chemistry.

BRIAN: It was nice.

YOU: We share some beliefs.

BRIAN: Yes.

YOU: So they're twice as real as if we didn't share them with each other.

BRIAN: Yes.

YOU: And if we're patient, and stick with each other, we'll get to the point where we are in tune with each other. And maybe there will be more people.

BRIAN: Beautiful people?

YOU: Yes, and people attracted to beauty, who can become beautiful.

BRIAN: And then we can help each other become strong.

YOU: Yes, without compromise.

You sit and look out the window.

BRIAN: We just made a decision.

YOU: I think so. We'll see what comes of it.

BRIAN: I think we should just live our lives and if it happens, it happens.

YOU: Okay.

BRIAN: I have to remember it, and you have to remember it, for it to happen.

YOU: Yeah, that makes sense.

BRIAN: Okay. Well, I think I've had enough talking for today. I'd better get up and go for a walk.

YOU: Yes, I don't think I can do anything else. But we need to be apart, need to take a break from each other.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So I'll walk one way, and you'll walk the other.

BRIAN: Right.

You say this as you walk out the door of the cafe, and you go your way, and he goes his.

YOU BOTH AT THE SAME TIME: Bye!

You walk toward the setting sun and think of whatever, and then of whether you and Brian really will be what you've promised. Will his prayers work? Maybe they will prove to you that God exists, but probably not. It could just be something in his brain that evolved to need prayers to unlock it. But then, you realize that you don't know that it isn't God. There is something about reality that seems spoken by God.

You don't know if things can change in your lived life. You wonder if you're young enough to keep changing. You wonder what Julia would say if you said that. She's always changing, and never changes, and is younger and has been older than you. How strange Julia is, and how like herself she is. You wonder if she would join in your pact with Brian. If there is a pact. Maybe the pact was made independent of you, but at the same time that you desired it, and it will work whether you like it or not. That would be the way of God, a god who strangely needs to wait for us to open the way to doing what would be in his own interests.

Perhaps the pact had already been made, and you and he just recognized the pact today. The pact had been made some time ago, first when you met Brian for the first time, next when Brian and Julia showed up on the same night, not so long ago.

You know that tomorrow will be a completely different day, and that you will be unable to stay in the same place you are in now. Life is what it is, and you keep on going through it.

You get back to your apartment and go on through your evening, and then you go to sleep.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
Episode 9 "Selling"
Written 18 March 2019
Released 18 March 2023

COMMENTS

1.

YOU: Huh. It seems like "reality" means, "that which will get you what you want in life".

BRIAN: Not the truth as it is in itself, independent of human needs and wants.

YOU: Yeah. So if that's "reality" in the "truth as it is in itself" sense...

In Beth's second line of dialogue, "That's" = "that which will get you what you want in life" and "reality" = "reality, what actually is, truth as it is in itself".

2. Joseph Godfrey may have been quoting someone else on hope (I don't remember). Godfrey's book on hope is *A Philosophy of Human Hope*.

3. What would it be like to be in sales?

ACT III

Episode 10 - "Monopoly"

You have nothing to say today. Just piles of articles to edit. Someone needs to submit three articles in a week to different journals. This is how they're going to maybe get to the next level. Someone else has a couple articles they don't need for a while. But you have nothing to say today. Just articles to edit. You have nothing but articles to edit. There is nothing to do but edit articles.

You run out of articles, but you still have nothing to say today. So you get up to go out to the cafe because every day is the same, every day is the same. But then you decide to make yourself tea at home, because you have nothing to say today. What if you met someone at the cafe and they wanted you to say something? You could talk to them today all you wanted, but you wouldn't say anything. Because today there is nothing but articles to edit.

You can see your thought getting in a loop, and it kind of bothers you, so you get your stuff together and head on down to...

MITZI's CAFE

A homely and just-right place. You have been going here several times a week for the last several years. There's a big glass window facing the street. You face it and see your reflection in the summer evening. You also can see into the cafe, where you see your friend Brian sitting, reading a book.

You enter the cafe. That was easy!

Inside the cafe you see a counter where a man waits in line behind a woman. She's ordering some kind of drink, and he's looking up at the menu posted above the barista's head, out of reach.

You stand in line. Good things come to those who wait!

Brian is turning the pages of his book, a turn for every two minutes. This means he is probably reading a fiction book. When he reads philosophy books, it takes more like 5 or 10 minutes between page turns.

After a modest interval, you arrive at the front of the line and order your favorite, green tea. Just the right amount of caffeine.

You get your drink and go to sit next to your friend Brian.

BRIAN: Oh, hey Beth.

YOU: Hey.

BRIAN: You got green tea.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: It's one of those nights.

YOU: For you too?

BRIAN: Yeah. I'm here reading a fiction book, not a philosophy book. Fiction always gets me down, but I read it when I'm going to seed, so maybe that explains it.

YOU: And when do you read philosophy?

BRIAN: When I'm going out to kill giants.

YOU: You mean windmills...

BRIAN: Well, they could be giants... We don't really know yet...

YOU: The "could be" is philosophy.

BRIAN: Exactly. You have to make sure they're not giants.

YOU: Someday we're going to have a re-evaluation of giants. You know how vampires are sympathetic characters? Same thing with giants and ogres.

BRIAN: Ah, the blurring of boundaries.

YOU: Yeah, pretty soon it will only be knights-errant who are evil.

BRIAN: The book I'm reading is called *Don Romero*. It's a re-telling of the Don Quixote myth set in Sunset City. Jesús Romero immigrates from

Mexico as a middle-schooler and makes friends with Ramon Hernandez. Jesús discovers a Classics Illustrated comic of *Don Quixote* and is then inspired to read the original book, which he rereads all the way until he finishes high school. He wants to emulate Don Quixote, wants to be the foolish knight, knowingly, but also sincerely. His sidekick is Ramon Hernandez the Fool who's into all kinds of advanced altruistic things but in a naive way. Jesús decides to develop an undying love for Rosa Gutierrez, and pledges his life to do altruistic things for her, most of which end up being fantasies that he only talks about. His first car is an old muscle car, which he calls Rozinante. Rozinante gets totaled and he has a funeral for it. Then he gets a new car and calls it "Hijo de Rozinante".

YOU: Wow, it looks like you're almost finished.

BRIAN: Yeah, do you care if I spoil it for you?

YOU: No, that's fine.

BRIAN: Jesús realizes after a while that he's an incel. He says "I'm an incel for you and you alone, Rosa." Ramon decides they should start a movement of being heroes, and they attract other incels and dreamers who try to prove their love to their crushes through different kinds of gallant idealism. The movement is called Quixotism, in honor of Jesús' inspiration. Quixotism then becomes so powerful that it sucks away members from the alt-right. Someone recognizes this later in Jesús' life -- like in his forties -- in a newspaper article. So where I am now, he wants to tell Rosa about his achievement, in hopes that she will finally be impressed. He wants to bring her a pink rose to help impress her, but the vendor only has white roses and red roses. It's hard for him to choose, but he goes with white, for the purity of Rosa. All the way there, he's anxious about what she'll think of the rose he chose... Right now, in the book, he's walking back and forth a block away from her apartment, trying to work up the nerve to text her to tell her he's there...

YOU: Oh, so like he told her he had something to tell her?

BRIAN: Right, yeah.

YOU: So what happens? You've got me interested.

BRIAN: Um, it will take me a few minutes...

YOU: That's fine. I'll just look at my phone.

Tonight is going to be one of those nights.

There is nothing good on the Internet, as usual. It's all good, so none of it's good.

Brian finishes the book.

BRIAN: Okay, so she accepts him. "Over the years, you have diligently tried to earn my love, going to great lengths. You even brought me a white rose, my favorite color of rose. I never told you it was my favorite, but you knew, because you know me, Jesús. With this final accomplishment, I am willing to become your girlfriend. You have lived up to my expectations and then some." Then he kisses her hand and they try to figure out where to eat.

YOU: So it's a happy story.

BRIAN: Yes. I think so. Maybe it's supposed to be funny.

YOU: I wonder what kind of point the author was trying to make by having the main character be named Jesús, Jesus.

BRIAN: Maybe Jesus comes in different forms.

YOU: Or his work has to be done by people other than himself.

BRIAN: Right. Maybe you and I should be Jesus.

YOU: As an atheist, that makes the most sense out of the gospels for me.

BRIAN: Why is that?

YOU: Because then the gospels are just a pattern for living, and they're meant for everyone to try to live.

BRIAN: You don't think you need God's power to live it out?

YOU: I'm sure to actually live it out, yes. Most people aren't going to end up acting like Jesus, if they try. But you don't need a God to try. Nothing can stop a person from trying except themselves.

BRIAN: I guess as an atheist, trying your best is about the most you expect.

YOU: Things aren't always going to work out, but we do what we can.

BRIAN: I don't think all atheists think the way you do. It seems like if you were a really consistent atheist, you would just give up and let things happen.

YOU: That's fine. I'm not a real atheist. Secretly I'm a theist.

BRIAN: Really?

YOU: Yeah. I just don't realize it yet.

BRIAN: Okay, yeah, that makes sense.

Julia enters.

JULIA: Ugh. Tonight's one of those nights. I'm going to get stood up.

BRIAN: How do you know?

JULIA: I just know things about relationships sometimes.

BRIAN: But not all the time?

JULIA: No. But tonight I know that my first date isn't going to show up.

BRIAN: Federico?

JULIA: Federico.

YOU: Let's play Monopoly.

JULIA: You're feeling impulsive, Beth. You know what Monopoly's like.

YOU: I know. I know with my impulses.

So you go get the Monopoly box from the shelf and set up the board, money, cards and tokens. You're the car, Julia is the shoe, and Brian is the dog. You get into the game, not to win, but to enact the roles.

Time passes.

Time passes.

A man approaches.

MAN: Hey, you guys are playing Monopoly. I guess you're too far in for me to join?

BRIAN: Yeah, but you can watch if you want.

MAN: I love Monopoly. It's a classic. Me and my wife invite the college students from our church over to play board games.

BRIAN: You only invite two students? Or do you have other games at the same time?

MAN: We have other games too. We set up the card table so we can have two games going at once. We have a blast.

YOU: What other games are you into?

MAN: Just the classics. Clue is great. Settlers of Catan.

BRIAN: Settlers of Catan is newer.

MAN: I know, but for me and my wife it's a classic.

BRIAN: You say you go to church.

MAN: That's right.

BRIAN: What church do you go to?

MAN: Fullness Church of Hoheres Wesen.

You, Julia, and Brian playing this whole time.

MAN: Are you guys Christians?

YOU: No.

JULIA: No.

BRIAN: Sort of. I'm definitely a theist.

MAN: Here we are talking about religion and we haven't introduced ourselves! Hi, I'm Grant.

BRIAN: I'm Brian.

YOU: I'm Beth.

GRANT: Beth! I don't hear that name too often!

JULIA: Julia.

GRANT: Julia, pleased to meet you. So Brian, you're definitely a theist, but you're not a Christian?

BRIAN: Well... I might be a Christian...

GRANT: Depends on what people mean by "Christian", am I right?

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess you could say that.

GRANT: People get so hung up on labels.

BRIAN: Right, but labels are important.

GRANT: Absolutely. Want to know my label?

BRIAN: Absolutely.

GRANT: I consider myself to be a "Christian egoist"...

You and Julia stay below the surface of the water.

BRIAN: What do you mean by that?

GRANT: I love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind, and ego. *I* do, nobody else does. God doesn't love him for me. It's up to me, and *I* do

that.

BRIAN: Doesn't the Bible say that pride is a sin?

GRANT: People get so pious. They think that ego is the problem. Ego's not the problem. God created us to have egos. Pride is a problem. Ego's not a problem. So the piety is, we're supposed to give up our egos. As though that's salvation. Salvation is a negative. Real salvation is a positive. Connecting with the Father. The salvation of piety is a negative. Getting rid of the ego.

Julia has something to say.

JULIA: Hold on. I've been a lot of different people in my life...

GRANT: Interesting!

JULIA: ...and I've seen myself burn out over and over because of my ego. Ego is unhealthy.

GRANT: People get pious about health and balance. It's part of humility, or ego-killing. But health and balance don't give you life. Nothing gives you life like the Father.

JULIA: Really? Doesn't food give you life?

GRANT: Jesus says he's got food that will always keep you full.

JULIA: Okay, yeah.

GRANT: Believe it, sister! It's more than true!

Julia has the wisdom to disengage.

BRIAN: Okay, but aren't we supposed to become more like God? Is God prideful?

GRANT: God is not prideful, but he has an ego. Look at Jesus! That guy was very humble... huge ego!

BRIAN: Do you think God likes having an ego?

GRANT: Why not? God created us with egos. And God said everything he created was good! Very good!

BRIAN: You've never experienced love beyond ego, have you?

GRANT: Have you ever experienced the Father's love?

BRIAN: I'm not sure what you mean...

GRANT: Then you haven't! You'll know when it happens.

BRIAN: What if it never happens?

GRANT: Maybe it won't. But you look like the sort of guy who will find it someday. Or rather... it will find you!

YOU: You said something about "piety" earlier. What do you mean by that?

GRANT: Piety is just how people get so *serious* about things.

YOU: Shouldn't we be serious about things?

GRANT: Absolutely! Being serious is great. I'm serious about things all the time!

YOU: So what's wrong with piety?

GRANT: The problem with piety is that there's no *life* in it. Do you want to go around life like you're dead? No! Be alive. Love God because you want to. Do good things because you want to. God can make you want to do good things more, right. But only if you love him. You think you can love God if you don't want to? Show me. Good luck.

YOU: How do you know God exists?

GRANT: Do I need to know he exists to love him? The rest is just trust. Nobody knows anything!

BRIAN: You don't act like you don't know anything...

GRANT: Rest assured, if I know anything... it's that I don't know anything! But I don't know even know that... so I know things!

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess that's where I've gotten to myself.

GRANT: Good! We agree on something!

JULIA: If Christians are so great, why do they cause so much suffering?

GRANT: Because we're sinners!

JULIA: Isn't that a way to escape responsibility by trying to appear humble?

GRANT: Maybe evading responsibility is one of our sins!

YOU: Aren't the big political divisions in our country between secular people and Christians?

GRANT: Sure, but maybe the secular people are the ones who have the problems! Why not?

BRIAN: Our country is tearing apart. Doesn't that mean something to you?

GRANT: Absolutely. We have to learn to be friends.

BRIAN: Don't you think that if we have to learn to be friends, we have to internalize our own problems and not blame other people? Doesn't that mean we have to not see things from our own point of view so much?

GRANT: People think we all have to be friends. And I agree. The only enemies we have are the powers and principalities. Satan. And Satan wants us to make the very idea of "we all have to be friends" be our God. It's the subtle, subtle *lie* of the enemy. Satan wants to give us *everything* we want as long as he keeps us from God.

BRIAN: How do you know your point of view is correct?

GRANT: Because it gives life. Do you have a better way to choose a correct view?

BRIAN: If you add up the different things in life, shouldn't you be able to extrapolate into the future and, *see* the things that will give more life later? You don't want to find out that you're wrong later on.

GRANT: Why should you think that reality adds up into a whole? How do you know that is true?

BRIAN: It's always been that way.

GRANT: Really? How do you know that?

BRIAN: Because it's always appeared to me that way.

GRANT: But is that a good reason for the future to not be different?

BRIAN: It doesn't make any sense for me to not see it that way.

GRANT: So you just see it.

BRIAN: And you just see what you see.

GRANT: That's my reality.

BRIAN: I think that we can know more about reality. I think God is where everything we see comes from, and God has to be a being who loves us. In order to contact us metaphysically, he has to share our experiences. And he endures us for so long because he loves us.

GRANT: That's a nice way of putting things, and when I was younger, I might have believed in God that way. But I'm going to reject it. I prefer to believe in God because it's how *I* see things. No rules. Just faith.

BRIAN: Okay.

GRANT: Hey, you're young, you'll see more of life. You haven't got past your block yet. Don't look down. Don't care too much. The important thing is that we both believe in God. It doesn't matter too much how we get there.

BRIAN: Do we both believe in the same God?

GRANT: If you're right, then my God is just your God, right? And if I'm right, your God is just my God.

BRIAN: I think your God is a picture. God speaks it to you, the same way he speaks any other picture. You trust it, and that helps you trust overall, which helps you trust him. But it's not necessarily the picture he'll show you when your heart is aligned with his.

GRANT: You may be right. We Christians long to see God face to face.

BRIAN: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

GRANT: You may be right, brother. You may be right. You ever think about going to church?

BRIAN: I've thought about it, yes.

GRANT: If you want to check out Fullness, we have Saturday night and Sunday morning services. You might like our midweek Bible study more, though, because you have the Intellectual mind-type.

BRIAN: "Mind-type".

GRANT: Ha ha, just a little Christianese! I forget sometimes. Mind-types are like what the flesh of your brain is into or good at. Your muscles. It's one of those personality type fads that come through. Boy do those add up!

BRIAN: "Mind-type"... interesting...

GRANT: I can see the wheels in your head turning...

Brian finishes his drink.

Grant looks at his drink.

GRANT: Haha! This whole time I forgot to drink my drink! Well, it won't drink itself! I'm going to leave you guys to your game. Nice talking. See you in another life!

He walks away.

YOU: That was generous of him, to offer to meet us in another life.

JULIA: He might be back in a week.

YOU: That could be another life. Nobody dies in Mitzi's.

JULIA: Not even that guy who drank cyanide.

BRIAN: I feel full of something... it's not all nice.

JULIA: You didn't like that guy.

BRIAN: I liked that guy... I liked a lot of what he said... interesting point of view... I feel... empty... I'm ... aching.

JULIA: Yeah. I felt the way you do now the whole time.

BRIAN: Living in the future?

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: Yeah. He had an interesting energy.

BRIAN: We were already feeling weird before he started talking to us.

JULIA: But now we're overstimulated.

BRIAN: Yeah, but I can still tell that he brought a joy that was aching.

JULIA: He didn't feel the ache.

YOU: Really?

JULIA: No, but he has the ache in him. We felt his ache for him.

BRIAN: Maybe he knows something we don't, though.

JULIA: He definitely knows something we don't. According to your philosophy, Brian, doesn't he come from somewhere, like a real place?

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: Yeah, he's been somewhere.

BRIAN: You've been a lot of places, Julia.

JULIA: Yeah.

BRIAN: He seems whole and fresh, but then... aching.

JULIA: How do I seem?

BRIAN: You're struggling...

JULIA: But then?

BRIAN: You're just you. Just Julia.

YOU: Maybe if we knew Grant better we would think he was just Grant.

BRIAN: Would he be whole and fresh, but then... aching... but then Grant?

JULIA: "Grant" and "aching" would be hard to tell apart.

YOU: Is there anything wrong with carrying an ache around?

BRIAN: I know that in the New Testament, people go around with a "body of death" that they want to get past. Probably Grant would say something like, "Absolutely! I'm carrying around a terrible ache! Keeps me humble!"

JULIA: So he can justify all kinds of unhealthiness.

BRIAN: He thinks he has a life in heaven.

YOU: Maybe he does.

BRIAN: When times are hard, people like him do well. That's a benefit to him.

YOU: But life is pretty good these days, right?

BRIAN: There's a Calamity coming.

YOU: Yeah. But if we survive that, then what?

BRIAN: People will go around with their aches.

YOU: Julia, do you think the ache is his pain?

JULIA: No. It's something else, but it feels like an ache to us. If he feels it, it will also feel like an ache.

YOU: What is it really?

JULIA: I don't know. I know things with my feelings. Maybe Brian can figure it out.

BRIAN: You and I are connected to invisible things, Julia.

JULIA: Oh thanks Brian! You're making me blush!

BRIAN: Now you're making me stammer.

JULIA: You didn't actually stammer.

BRIAN: You didn't actually blush.

YOU: Are we going to declare a truce in Monopoly and put it away?

BRIAN: That sounds fine. I want to retire to my house on Baltic. That'll be enough for a little dog like me.

YOU: I'll retire to my hotel on St. Charles. Only the finest room service.

JULIA: I'll retire to my railroad system... so I can travel in my retirement.

You put the game away and all three of you get fresh cups of tea. The night sets in, and you have nothing to say to each other. You don't know why you have nothing to say to each other, and you're not about to break your silence to find out.

It's enough to be present to each other. If you said out loud that you were being present to each other, the presence would be broken.

Then you finish your drink and leave, and Brian and Julia say a few things you can hear as you walk away.

JULIA: So what's that book about?

BRIAN: It's called *Being and Having*.

JULIA: *Being and Having*?

BRIAN: The title is about how we are bodies, and have bodies...

JULIA: Interesting...

You walk out the door and into the night.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 10 "Monopoly"

Written 29 March 2019

Released 29 March 2023

COMMENTS

1. *Being and Having* is by Gabriel Marcel.

Episode 11 - "Chutes and Ladders"

You have nothing to do today. You have decided to give yourself the day off because you don't have any editing jobs to do. No problem, you can decide to give yourself the day off whenever. No problem.

You walk from one side of the apartment you live in to the other, not realizing that you are doing this, as you engage in tasks at one side of the apartment and then the other. There are a lot of things you don't realize about yourself, like that secretly you just want to walk from one side of the apartment

to the other, that secretly the things you think you're engaging with are not what you're really into, that you're really a person who deep down likes to walk from one end to the other of your apartment.

And you realize that you are going back and forth, and you realize that that means that you are secretly a defective person who should not love her life, who should contemplate a major change: a new job, new friends, new city, suicide. It's all part of the same thing. Why be satisfied with your life? Life satisfaction is a lie, when there's a better life for you somewhere else.

You normally love life, even when it's hard, even when it's meaningless. But now you find yourself in a quandary. There is certainly a better life for you somewhere. Surely if all of your friends approved of your life, you could allow yourself to approve of your own life. But if they don't understand, then you need to consider a major change: a new job, new friends, new city, suicide. Your friends want the best for you, a major change: a new job, new friends, new city, suicide.

You are normally okay with being unhappy, sometimes. But couldn't there be a better life out there?

You decide to write down what you've been thinking about, thinking that it might make for a good story. But you know that you're just avoiding the thing you really need to do, which is to make a major change. Change is hard. But if you're brave, you can do it. If you suffer, then you should be unhappy and if you're unhappy, you should contemplate a major change. Change is scary. But if you're brave, you can do what's in your best interests.

Why are you thinking these thoughts? you wonder. Is this healthy? Your editing business works for you pretty well. You know that if you talked to your friends, they would never say to your face that if you suffered you ought to be unhappy, and that if you are unhappy you need to make a major change. In fact, people like Brian and Julia are the last people to mean that even behind your back. You have some other friends, some of them ex-friends, who live in your head, though. If you could just get rid of them, you could have a perfect (that

is, adequate) 10 out of 10 life satisfaction score. In other words, you could be content with your suffering and unhappiness, and that contentment would allow you to be happier and to suffer less. And you would be a braver person.

Thinking this helps to give you strength, but you have those nagging doubts, from people you rarely see anymore, or hopefully will never see again. Doubts from people who thought they were your friends, at the time.

You know thought traps like these. You know how seeking the truth doesn't work when you get into one of them. You know how you get trolled by the desire to do the right thing, think the right thing, consider all the points of view. You know all this.

These thought traps are so seductive. You start to have to think in terms of what's good for you in your lived life, rather than thinking in terms of objective truth. You'll get trolled by this thought trap if you let yourself flow into it. You don't know the truth. All you know is your apartment, and your feelings. There's no room in the world for there to be God, or even no God, or even a lack of knowledge of whether God exists or not. There is room for suffering, unhappiness, and lack of life satisfaction.

You decide to change your clothes and go to Mitzi's Cafe. And while you walk to Mitzi's, with a burning feeling you know that there has to be something more than this, and for a moment, you know that there is.

WAITING FOR MARGOT episode 11 "Chutes and Ladders"

You enter Mitzi's Cafe and order some green tea. You know that caffeine will do nothing for you, nor the flavor of the tea. And you know that there has to be more than this.

You see Julia with a man -- probably a date. And Brian by himself at another table. You sit down next to Brian.

YOU: Brian, do you think that I should make a major change?

BRIAN: What did you have in mind?

YOU: New job, new city, new friends.

BRIAN: Are you unhappy?

YOU: Yes.

BRIAN: Why is that?

YOU: Because I suffer.

BRIAN: Is that a good reason to be unhappy?

YOU: Maybe.

BRIAN: So you're in doubt about that... now, doubt... that's a reason to be unhappy...

YOU: Yeah, I guess that makes sense.

BRIAN: Well, this is odd. You're not usually like this. Did something happen?

YOU: I took the day off work today.

BRIAN: Okay, maybe that's it.

YOU: But this doesn't happen every day I take off work.

BRIAN: Like this is something new?

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: Okay, so it's how you're feeling today. You might feel differently tomorrow.

YOU: Yeah. That's true.

BRIAN: Hey, you're middle-aged, so you should know this stuff by now. Maybe there's something to what you're saying.

YOU: Maybe.

BRIAN: Maybe this, maybe that.

YOU: I had the feeling, while I was coming here, that there had to be more than this. I don't know exactly what "this" is, but there has to be more than it.

BRIAN: Yeah. There does have to be.

YOU: And for a moment I thought that there was something.

BRIAN: Yeah. I think there is something.

YOU: But you don't know.

BRIAN: When I'm not talking out loud, I know.

YOU: So you don't know.

BRIAN: Well, because I'm talking to you, I'll say, yeah, I don't know.

YOU: But you don't believe it.

BRIAN: Absolutely not. I firmly believe that there's more than this. God speaks meaning to all of us, all the time.

YOU: But you can't prove God's existence.

BRIAN: No, but God speaks to you even through your belief that he doesn't exist.

YOU: But maybe it's not God.

BRIAN: It's God.

YOU: You don't know that.

BRIAN: You're right, I don't know that. And it is God. I don't know that God exists. But God exists.

YOU: As though your beliefs don't have anything to do with whether or not he does...

BRIAN: Exactly. God exists, or he doesn't exist, regardless of what I believe.

YOU: So you're an agnostic?

BRIAN: No, that would be dishonest. I believe that God exists.

YOU: But you don't know that God exists.

BRIAN: No.

YOU: So you're half-agnostic.

BRIAN: I guess so.

YOU: Sorry I'm pushing so hard... I've got a weird energy in me.

BRIAN: Have you been getting into any thought traps recently?

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: Okay, we should play a game, then. Take our minds out of this.

He gets up and brings back Chutes and Ladders.

BRIAN: You want to play Chutes and Ladders?

YOU: Okay.

You and Brian set up the board and choose your pieces. The game came with a spinner, but it's broken, so you go and get a die from the Monopoly board to take its place.

BRIAN: Maybe someone will interrupt us, like last time.

YOU: Maybe.

You play some more, only speaking as much as is necessary to keep the game going.

BRIAN: Chutes and Ladders might have been the wrong choice.

YOU: Yeah, this game is really existential.

BRIAN: You don't have any real choice.

YOU: But you go through the game getting involved in it, even if there's no choice.

BRIAN: At least everyone wins at the end.

YOU: Yeah, the board is set up for that. But is it really winning? From a player's point of view, isn't the game all about choices made? The winning tile, what does it even mean? What are these kids getting out of life?

BRIAN: Maybe they died and went to heaven.

YOU: Maybe they're in middle school, or high school.

BRIAN: Are you enjoying this game?

YOU: Yeah, it's okay.

BRIAN: And you don't have any choice.

YOU: No, it's all chance and necessity.

BRIAN: But you're participating in it.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: You can choose to participate or not, you can choose to trust or not.

YOU: And that's my choice.

BRIAN: Are you satisfied with this game?

YOU: Yeah, I'm pretty happy with this game.

Up the ladders, down the chutes, around and around, no game, all game. You and Brian were made for gentle games like Chutes and Ladders, not for wargames or mindgames or lovegames. You two will be wiped out some day by the kind of people who are at a 7 out of 10 on life satisfaction and a 9 out of 10 in happiness.

YOU: Brian, since I'm being weird today, I'm going to tell you something.

BRIAN: Okay.

YOU: You're a real friend.

BRIAN: You're a real friend, too, Beth.

YOU: We're playing Chutes and Ladders.

BRIAN: Yes. Here we are in life.

YOU: Next time I feel weird, I'm going to remember to trust.

You and Brian finish the game.

Julia and her associate get up from their table and approach.

MAN: Hey, I see you guys were playing Chutes and Ladders.

YOU: Yes, we were.

MAN: That used to be my least-favorite game growing up. I thought it was so stupid.

JULIA: This is Eric, by the way.

YOU: Hi Eric.

ERIC: Hi.

YOU: I'm Beth.

ERIC: Hi, Beth.

BRIAN: I'm Brian.

ERIC: Hi, Brian.

YOU: You two are on a date?

ERIC: Yes. It's been going pretty well.

YOU: And now you're over here.

ERIC: Yes.

YOU: What were you saying about hating Chutes and Ladders as a kid?

ERIC: Yes, well, I hated it because there was no point to it. No way to game it.

YOU: Yeah, we were just realizing that all of life is like that. There's no way to game life, all you can do is either trust it, or not.

ERIC: That sounds like a religious thing to think. Are you religious?

YOU: No. Well, maybe I'm part of the religion of life.

ERIC: The religion of midlife, perhaps?

Eric does look old enough to know what that is.

YOU: Yes, the way no one has any answers.

ERIC: And none of us know any better than anyone else.

YOU: Right.

ERIC: That's a religion?

YOU: Yes, I think so.

ERIC: What's the god of that religion? Every religion has a god.

YOU: Brokenness?

ERIC: Maybe. Maybe limitation.

YOU: Or maybe just existence?

ERIC: Maybe there is no god, after all. Which makes it the true atheism.

JULIA: What about caring about people? Couldn't that be a god?

BRIAN: Yeah, that can be a god.

YOU: But there's something more than this. There's something more than people. There's something more than humility.

ERIC: What would that be?

YOU: I don't know, but when I need it, I'm alive. And when I let myself sink into the religion of midlife, I become sad. I don't feel sad, but I am sad.

ERIC: And that's the best there is, and you have to accept it.

JULIA: No! Why should we have to accept that?

ERIC: Because over time, we come to realize that.

JULIA: "Over time, we come to"... Oh... I see what's going on. Our god is maturity.

ERIC: No, it's not. It's reality. We are coming to understand reality, over time.

JULIA: And you know reality better as you get older?

BRIAN: Isn't it possible to get less in touch with the truth as you get older?

ERIC: But over time, we move beyond the truth, if we really did know the truth as younger people. We don't presume to know the truth.

JULIA: It still sounds to me like your god is maturity.

ERIC: Julia, I really appreciate you. And maybe you're right. When you're my age, you'll know for sure.

Julia is angry but doesn't say anything.

BRIAN: Eric, I don't know if you know this, but Julia has been older than you are.

ERIC: Really? I don't understand.

JULIA: Brian is just saying that I've thought about this stuff a lot.

Brian looks confused, then seemingly understands. You seemingly understand that Julia doesn't like talking about her curse with her dates.

ERIC: I hope I haven't come off as smug or all-knowing.

YOU: No, not at all.

ERIC: Great, I wouldn't want to offend anyone.

YOU: No, you haven't offended any of us.

You are sincere in saying this. It's beautiful how much he cares about the feelings of people who are connected to his date.

ERIC: I know there are a lot of problems in the world, but it's so hard to do anything about them.

YOU: I know. You just have to do what you can.

ERIC: Well, it's getting kind of late. It was great to meet you all!

He walks out of the cafe.

JULIA: I got him to leave early.

YOU: You did?

JULIA: Sometimes, when I want something, I get it.

YOU: How did you know it was you?

JULIA: I know.

YOU: Is this a consistent thing?

JULIA: No, it's only when I really want it.

BRIAN: It seemed like you didn't want him to know that you are sometimes older than your age.

JULIA: Yeah, it's better that way.

BRIAN: Why is that?

JULIA: You know why.

BRIAN: Okay, yeah, I know why.

YOU: Do you think you'll ever see him again?

JULIA: No, but I will. He'll come back under a different name.

You three sit silently for half a minute.

BRIAN: How's the dating coming along?

JULIA: Some dates go better than others. I still don't really know what form my man is going to take.

BRIAN: But at least you're still going through different ones.

JULIA: But I get tired of it. Brian, you believe in God. Cry out to him for me to be done with all this. I cry out, but I know it doesn't reach him, because I don't believe.

BRIAN: Keep moving me.

JULIA: What do you mean?

BRIAN: Horrify me. Then I can cry out.

JULIA: Okay. I get tired. I get real tired of all this. It makes me want to scream sometimes. But there's nowhere to scream in this city. I've looked everywhere for a screaming place. Is this a screaming place? Nope. In Mitzi's Cafe, people live forever. They don't scream.

BRIAN: I wish I could be horrified, but I'm not.

JULIA: Brian, you believe in God, but do you understand what it's like to live in the moment?

BRIAN: I've heard that it's a really good thing.

JULIA: No, Brian, to live in the moment is a really bad thing. Living in the moment when the moment is empty is to have no past or future to escape to. When the moment is frustration, it's hell and you wish there was some way out of the moment. As the same thing happens over and over, time stops continuing forward in a line and starts looping on itself, and it's the same thing. Each date is unique and different and everything becomes the same. There's a level on which everything is the same.

BRIAN: The term for time continuing on in a line is "chronos", and the term for time looping on itself is "gathered time" or "kairos".

JULIA: Okay, yeah. Chronos is good. Kairos is bad. My life is a moment carried forward in time, with lots of novelty and variety and everything is the same.

YOU: Do you ever feel like there has to be something more than all of this?

JULIA: Yes. That's the only thing that keeps me alive. Not that I hope that there really is something, but that the ache of the desire gives me life.

YOU: Yes.

BRIAN: And is this ache the same as not having life satisfaction, Beth?

YOU: Hm... no...

JULIA: Life satisfaction?

BRIAN: People can suffer a lot, and even be unhappy, and still be satisfied with their lives. But people can not suffer, feel pleasure, even be happy, and not be satisfied with their lives.

JULIA: Okay. Yeah, this ache is different. Completely different.

BRIAN: How so?

JULIA: This ache is alive.

YOU: It's definite, and there's courage to it.

JULIA: But the other ache is dead. It's not even really an ache, but more of a gnawing.

YOU: There's no courage to it, no confrontation. It's something you do with a stunned mind.

BRIAN: So it's like by maintaining that there ought to be something truly good, you stay alive.

YOU: Yeah. Even if that thing doesn't exist.

BRIAN: There's a certain kind of person who tries to suppress that ache.

YOU: Yeah. Why would they do that?

BRIAN: I don't know, but it's interesting that they seem so eager to do that.

YOU: Maybe they used to feel it, but it was inconvenient, so they changed their values so that they wouldn't feel it anymore, and now it seems bad to them.

BRIAN: Maybe they just had to go to work.

JULIA: You can definitely feel like there should be something more out of life when you're at work.

YOU: But if you do the same thing, day after day, there's a deadening impulse.

BRIAN: Maybe things will get better when nobody has to work because robots will be doing work for us.

YOU: Brian, my life is unstructured enough as it is. Neither work nor lack of work would help me on days like today.

BRIAN: Yeah. When you have defeated all your enemies, the last, which you can never defeat, is Time.

YOU: That sounds like a line from a book.

BRIAN: It should be. Maybe I should put it in a book.

YOU: Do you write books?

BRIAN: I'm working on one right now.

YOU: What's it about?

BRIAN: The usual things I'm into. I don't want to talk about it any more than that for now.

YOU: Okay. Well, I'd be interested in reading it when it's done.

BRIAN: Okay. Remind me if I forget.

YOU: If you can't defeat Time, maybe it would be good to dream your life away. Like in *Brave New World*.

BRIAN: No, because while you can never defeat Time, you can always confront it, if you have courage. If you can trust well, you can fight Time, or... maybe... get it to respect you... no need to fight, just to be full of the spirit....

YOU: But how can we have courage if we know better than to have courage? If we know better than to ignore the limitations of the world and listen to our hearts?

BRIAN: That's a good question.

YOU: But if we could do that, it would be worthwhile to live a life like mine or yours, every day the same, no dreams or anesthesia.

BRIAN: Yes.

JULIA: So what are we going to do?

BRIAN: What do you mean?

JULIA: People are just going to turn us off. Pinch us like a candle.

YOU: We're going to quench each other.

BRIAN: Then we have to use our discipline to try again, to awaken again.

YOU: You want to start a religion?

BRIAN: Our god would be God.

YOU: In the way that the midlife religion has no god?

BRIAN: Yes.

YOU: I believe in that kind of God.

BRIAN: You do?

YOU: I do but I want to really believe.

BRIAN: In the Bible, someone says to Jesus "I believe, help my unbelief".

YOU: Cry out to your God for me, Brian, to help my unbelief in the God we already share.

BRIAN: Can you horrify me?

YOU: No. But maybe your God will move in you to cry out for me.

BRIAN: We'll see.

JULIA: Brian. Don't quench her.

BRIAN: I live on discipline and don't know how to be otherwise. But God's behavior ultimately doesn't depend on me.

JULIA: So we have to wait.

BRIAN: There's a Simone Weil book called *Waiting for God*.

JULIA: So we're waiting for God.

There's not too much to say to each other after that for a while, and you put the game away, and leave the cafe separately.

You go for a walk outside and try praying to Brian's God, or to whatever God there is behind whatever Brian believes. You suppose that Brian would say that behind whatever belief there is itself, there must be a personal being of ultimate meaning-conveying ability. So Brian's God has to be the real God, by definition, although at the same time Brian might misunderstand him. It doesn't make sense, but now is not a time for making sense of things. Courage is not about making sense of things.

You pray as sincerely as you can, but you don't feel anything.

You come back to your apartment, feeling tired, and agitated, and content.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 11 "Chutes and Ladders"

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COMMENTS

(no comments)

Episode 12 - "Patience"

Last night... was it last night? It was last night, right? It was last night. You wake up emotionally exhausted from last night. And yet on some level the day is looking up. The light from outside is a good color, not too dusty, and when you go outside to get a look around the air doesn't seem too smoggy. It's good when the outside world cooperates with you, with your mood. Maybe the nice weather is a key to open up that

part of you that doesn't feel so bad.

You try to get some work done, just to keep moving. It's hard to keep at it, though, because nothing is due too soon. You go for a walk, and that's nice, and then you come back to your apartment and sit and listen to music on the stereo. Then you think, "I need green tea", which is a thought that is both true and untrue at the same time. You look around for tea bags, but can't find any. It's a bit early to go to Mitzi's, but after making yourself more presentable, you go there.

(waiting for margot, ep. 12)

Here in Mitzi's, you get your tea and you sit down at a table. You look around, bored, and someone catches your eye. You look away, but then decide to go talk to him.

YOU: I have nothing to do.

MAN: Neither do I.

YOU: What brings you here in the afternoon?

MAN: I'm an actor. And a waiter. This is my day off. What about you?

YOU: I'm a freelance editor.

MAN: So you could come here any time you want, and get work done?

YOU: I could, but usually I don't.

MAN: Why is that?

YOU: I like to keep a separation between work and socializing.

MAN: So where do you work? Another cafe?

YOU: No, usually at home.

MAN: So then, you don't have a separation between home and work. Is that what it's like inside your head? Always working when you're at home?

YOU: Yeah, I guess that's true.

MAN: You could get into trouble that way.

YOU: Yeah, that's true.

MAN: Don't worry, I've been there.

YOU: You used to be like me and now you're not?

MAN: That's right. Something I learned in acting class. "Patience."

YOU: How does that work?

MAN: Don't try to win.

YOU: Oh... because impatience is all about trying to win...

MAN: Exactly. Improv. In improv you want to avoid winning as much as possible.

YOU: Because winning cuts off the flow of the story?

MAN: Exactly. "Improv is a game where winning is losing."

YOU: I guess the point is for a story to happen, and that's winning.

MAN: You're right. But don't even want the story to happen. Your character doesn't want that to happen. You want your character to never defeat the other characters, but always want their heart's desire.

YOU: That's a good idea. I should remember that.

MAN: You will if you do.

YOU: I think there's another angle to impatience. Wanting to be saved.

MAN: Yeah. Sometimes it's hard not to want to be saved. But you can want to be saved like you want to win, by lunging for it or jabbing for it.

YOU: Yeah.

MAN: Impatience is like eating candy. You want something sweet and simple. If you're a kid, you might want to eat candy all the time. But the thing about candy is that it leaves a bitter feeling inside of your body, no matter how sweet it is.

YOU: Right.

MAN: But the meals that don't leave a bitter feeling have a lot of dishes to prepare, to get the variety. And they have vegetables. And you drink water instead of soda.

YOU: Right. It takes an hour to make dinner.

MAN: But candy is there for you in the moment. Exactly.

YOU: So how does this relate to separating work from home?

MAN: You can think all you want if you have patience. You won't burn out your mind with aggression.

YOU: That's a nice tip, thanks.

MAN: As an actor, I have to learn how to not have boundaries to my

thinking, and yet still not burn myself out. I thought you might have the same situation as both a freelance editor and a thoughtful person.

YOU: Why do you think I'm a thoughtful person?

MAN: Everyone's thoughtful these days, so I just assumed.

YOU: You're leaving?

The man finishes his drink.

MAN: Yes.

YOU: What was your name?

MAN: Darryl.

YOU: I'm Beth.

DARRYL: Okay, maybe see you around! I gotta go.

He leaves.

You sit, wondering if there's some kind of God who provides strangers at the right time. Probably not, right? But maybe so.

Time passes.

Julia walks in.

JULIA: Hello.

YOU: Hi.

JULIA: How are you doing?

YOU: I feel weird.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: But I feel a little better. I just talked to a man today, before you came, who gave me a good tip. "Patience", he said.

JULIA: How does that work?

YOU: You can be in your head all you want to or need to, but if each of your thoughts is like, not jabbing or lunging, you won't damage yourself as much.

JULIA: What does that have to do with patience? Or with last night?

YOU: Well, the reason why people lunge or jab is because they're

impatient for winning. Or for salvation.

JULIA: Okay, that makes sense.

YOU: I'm just now realizing this.

JULIA: You already realized it to a certain extent.

YOU: I know. But it helps to hear it this time.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: It's hard for you to be patient, isn't it?

JULIA: I haven't learned that lesson very well because I haven't been forced to. I never stay with the same past and future for long enough for it to have to sink in. A lot of endurance, not a lot of patience.

YOU: But you're aware of all this?

JULIA: Yeah, I'm aware of a lot of things.

YOU: So, then the connection to last night... I don't even remember all of what led up to last night, but I think it's not as likely to happen next time if I practice patience in each of my thoughts.

JULIA: Yeah, that sounds like it could help.

YOU: So what's going on with you?

JULIA: I've been having a hard time getting in touch with my dates recently. A lot of voicemails, or they don't return their texts.

YOU: How does that affect your overall relationship with your man?

JULIA: I don't know. I like to think that my dates are getting somewhere with him. I always used to think so. But I'm beginning to wonder if dating has anything to do with what's going on. Maybe I need to stop dating them / him. But I don't know what else to do.

YOU: You think that maybe they have to go away before you can find the one man that all of them really are?

JULIA: Yeah... but relating to them has to be important in some way, too.

YOU: Maybe you're learning how to relate to them, so that when they become their true form, you'll be ready.

JULIA: It's hard to say, because they're all so different.

YOU: I think a lot of people have to go through date after date and learn about the opposite sex until finally we're ready for that one person. How do you know that all these first dates are really the same person? If they're all so different from each other.

JULIA: I look at them and I just know.

You don't know why, but you believe her.

YOU: I believe you.

She nods, no smile.

JULIA: Yeah. I keep trying to date people I've never met before, but then they turn out to be him. I can't get away from him.

YOU: What if you tried to date someone you knew very well?

JULIA: I've thought about people like that.

YOU: Would Brian work?

JULIA: No, I don't feel anything for him.

YOU: But if you could date him, he wouldn't be this one man.

JULIA: That's true.

YOU: Anyone else?

JULIA: People I knew a few years ago. I would try to date them but we'd just be hanging out so it didn't work.

YOU: So you can't get away from this man.

JULIA: Well, I could quit dating.

YOU: But that's hard.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: What would it be like to meet this man when he's done becoming whatever?

JULIA: I think he would have no idea what he went through with me all those years.

YOU: Yeah, that makes sense.

JULIA: Maybe it would be his first time dating anyone. But I wouldn't have to teach him anything.

YOU: After all the waiting...

JULIA: Yeah, he would be a good guy.

YOU: How would you know it was time?

JULIA: Well, if we make it to a third date, that's a pretty good sign. Each

date after that is good.

YOU: That would be a lot more than you've ever gotten.

JULIA: Yeah. But you never really know if it's for real.

YOU: Don't be too cautious.

JULIA: You don't know what I've been through.

You realize you've made a trespass.

YOU: Sorry. But hopefully there will be a way that you can really know that he is what he is, when that time comes.

JULIA: Yeah. Hopefully.

YOU: Maybe you'll just know.

JULIA: Yeah. But I can't count on that. There are a lot of things I don't just know and I have to figure out.

YOU: Yeah.

A pause.

JULIA: I'm bored.

YOU: You want to play Patience?

JULIA: What's that?

YOU: The card game where you put the cards face down on a table, and then flip them over two at a time and try to match the ones that are the same.

JULIA: Oh, yeah, we used to call that Memory.

YOU: There's a pack of cards with the other games on the game shelf.

JULIA: Okay, that could be fun.

You get the cards and lay them out, face down, on the table.

You and she get to playing.

JULIA: Why is this game called Patience?

YOU: Maybe it's because you have to hold the cards in your head while you wait to see where they go.

JULIA: Okay. That makes sense.

YOU: But for me, usually, I flip a card and then have an intuition where to look for it. I just reach over and...

You flip a card.

YOU: No, not that time. But sometimes it's the card I want.

JULIA: Because you remember where it was.

YOU: But it's fast and easy. I don't think it's the same kind of patience as that man from earlier was talking about.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: Well, this is a low-key kind of game at least.

JULIA: And it isn't over until it's over.

YOU: Sometimes you remember a card and then the other person gets it before you can. So you have to adjust.

JULIA: Yeah, that's something like what the man was talking about.

Joe the barista comes around cleaning the tables and sees what you're up to.

JOE: Patience! That's a game! Who's winning?

YOU: We don't know yet, we haven't finished.

JOE: Man, I remember playing Patience when I was in college.

YOU: Not poker?

JOE: Not poker, no way. We were into Patience in my dorm. I thought I was pretty good, but then my roommate's friend started playing.

YOU: He had a better memory?

JOE: Photographic memory. But then I started using mnemonic devices. Never really caught up to him. But mnemonic devices helped me when I was a waiter. So it's all good.

YOU: Did you remember that guy from earlier?

JOE: Yeah, I overhear all your conversations! Lightly... I forget them all...

YOU: But you remember him?

JOE: Sure. He comes in here sometimes.

YOU: He said he was a waiter.

JOE: Yeah. I believe him.

YOU: We were talking about patience.

JOE: Oh, I get it... patience... a wait-er...

YOU: Yeah, I guess that is a connection.

JOE: I like making connections. Hey, I gotta get back to work. They don't pay me to charm the customers!

He gets back to work.

You and Julia play, quietly for a bit. You eventually finish pairing off all the cards.

JULIA: I have 12 pairs.

YOU: I have 14.

JULIA: Okay, you won. Want to play again?

YOU: No.

JULIA: I'm okay with that.

Brian comes in.

JULIA: Brian's here.

Brian is busy waiting to get his drink.

JULIA: Brian.

He doesn't turn to her.

JULIA (a little louder): Brian.

He doesn't turn to her.

JULIA (a little louder): Brian.

He turns.

BRIAN: Oh hey, Julia. And Beth.

Then it's his turn in line and he's engrossed in the transaction process.

YOU: What were you doing there, Julia?

JULIA: Calibrating.

You think that's pretty funny and you laugh.

YOU: Brian does live in his head. I wonder what it's like inside there.

JULIA: I don't know.

YOU: It's not something you have intuitive knowledge of?

JULIA: I know some of what's up with him, but not all of it.

YOU: So you would have to figure out the rest.

JULIA: Yeah. But, uh, take your own advice, Beth. Don't try to figure him out. Especially not for fun.

YOU: Yeah, you're right.

Brian approaches, not having heard anything. He sets his drink down and sits.

YOU: Welcome to the table. We were just playing Patience.

BRIAN: Patience...

YOU: The card game.

BRIAN: Oh... it's been a long time since I played Patience.

YOU: Do you want to play a round of it?

BRIAN: No, that's okay.

YOU: Okay. How is your day?

BRIAN: First, how is yours? You were feeling pretty bad last night.

YOU: I'm feeling better. Just kind of emotionally exhausted.

BRIAN: Yeah, well, that's good. What helped you?

YOU: It's a nice day outside. And I had a good conversation with someone here earlier. Got me thinking about Patience in the first place. And then I played Patience with Julia.

JULIA: She won.

YOU: I wasn't trying though. Were you trying, Julia?

JULIA: No.

YOU: Then neither of us won or lost. The game happened, but no one won or lost.

BRIAN: Well, I think my day went alright. I went to UHW's library and

looked around some philosophy books. Wrote an email to my uncle. Read through some of my parents' papers.

JULIA: Did that make you sad?

BRIAN: No, not very sad. They were good people and lived beautiful lives. So I try to learn from them. Should I be sad?

JULIA: No, you don't have to be. You're not wired that way.

BRIAN: Huh... usually people want me to be sad... but you don't think I have to be sad.

JULIA: No, you're not a bad person.

Brian looks at her, not with gratitude, but with a certain shining in his eyes.

BRIAN: Thank you for saying that.

A beat.

BRIAN: So what did the man have to say about patience?

YOU: He said that we burn out our minds with impatient thinking.

BRIAN: How does that burn out the mind?

YOU: When we have to win, or we have to be saved all the time, we jab and lunge with each of our thoughts, and that causes damage.

BRIAN: Interesting... patience is a virtue.

YOU: Are you a patient person?

BRIAN: In a way yes, and in a way no. I think according to this guy's definition, I'm not patient. But I think I seem patient to other people. And I'm okay waiting in line or things like that.

YOU: I'm like that too... patient in one way, but not always in the way that the guy was talking about.

BRIAN: Is patience always a good thing?

YOU: It certainly makes more sense at this time of life.

BRIAN: Yeah, I picture patience as being something you learn before you're middle-aged. Is that true, Julia?

JULIA: It's true a lot of the time, but not all the time.

BRIAN: Malcolm X said something like it's good to be impatient to make things better for other people.

JULIA: Yes.

YOU: But if you're impatient, you burn yourself out or cause more damage than necessary.

BRIAN: So it seems like you have to have some impatient people to push things along, and some patient people to not cause harm or to fix things that the impatient people break in the process.

YOU: Maybe it's possible to be patient and change things at the same time. If you are a patient thinker, you don't burn yourself out, so then you can do more for other people.

BRIAN: You just have to remember to actually do that once you get there.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: Maybe I do want to play Patience after all.

YOU: Okay, yeah, let's do that. Do you want to play, Julia?

JULIA: Okay.

You set up the cards and connect with each other by getting into the circling rhythm of turn-taking. You're more aware of the score this time, but find yourselves all evenly matched. Brian and Julia tie with 9 pairs, and you are left with 8 in the end.

BRIAN: That was better than I expected it to be.

YOU: What did you expect it to be like?

BRIAN: I don't know... I guess I had some kind of expectation that I couldn't have put into words.

YOU: Do you get disappointed very often?

BRIAN: No, not really.

YOU: I don't, either.

JULIA: Yeah... life is hard, but I don't get disappointed.

BRIAN: Life is harder if you're not the kind of person to get disappointed.

YOU: In some ways.

BRIAN: Yeah, it's easier to be content. But discontent helps you get all the things you need, helps you fight other people for what you may need later to survive.

YOU: So in a scenario where people are in conflict, they need to be

unhappy. But when we live in peace, we need to learn to be content.

BRIAN: People who are discontented can create conflict.

JULIA: But discontent can end conflict. Sometimes.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's what Malcolm X was trying to do, I think.

JULIA: But then if people are too used to being discontented, they have to learn to be content once there is peace.

YOU: Maybe knowing where to be contented and where to be discontented is a form of patience. If you're impatient, you can't separate yourself from your discontentment.

BRIAN: Because you have to have contentment "NOW".

JULIA: Evil people can be patient.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's true.

JULIA: So once you become patient, you still have to not be evil.

BRIAN: And being evil will seem normal to you if you don't question it.

YOU: Julia, did you jump in with the "evil people can be patient" comment?

JULIA: What do you mean?

YOU: It didn't seem to follow what Brian was saying, exactly.

JULIA: There's an intuitive connection.

YOU: Okay, yeah, I can see that. Maybe it does flow, now that I think about it. If you think the answer is to be patient, watch out, because you might still be evil.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: But if people can't follow the connection, they think you're lunging out impatiently. And then they don't take you seriously.

BRIAN: It's like we don't care how true something is, if it's spoken by an impatient person, we can't trust it. And patient people can say things that aren't true and people will believe them. So it seems like it's really important for good people to be patient.

YOU: Hopefully when two people speak patiently, the truth is clear to everyone who hears.

BRIAN: I think that's sort of how things work. At least it's clearer. Truths are both believed in and trusted, and what people are looking for a lot of times is, what person can be trusted, between the two people who make

truth claims?

YOU: Like we organize ourselves into bodies of people first, then look for the objective truth second?

BRIAN: Yeah, and when there's less social conflict, it's easier for people to see whatever the objective or extra-social truth is. Easier to trust it.

YOU: So if there was a huge conflict over some kind of scientific fact...

BRIAN: Like, whether the Earth is round? If that conflict were big enough, people would have a hard time being sure it was round. Some people would be sure one way, some would be sure another, and there would be a lot of people who couldn't tell in the middle. A lot of people who thought that probably it was round but they couldn't put too much weight on that belief. And people who wouldn't mention that belief in polite society. No need to offend anyone. Our lived lives mostly go the same whether the Earth is round or not, whether we believe it or not. Plenty of human beings have believed the Earth was flat and still got through life okay.

YOU: Could that ever really happen?

BRIAN: Well, there are a lot of people who believe the Earth is flat, at least numerically. It's certainly something that can make sense to people who live in the 21st Century in a developed culture. It could get big for social reasons.

JULIA: Isn't this like belief in God?

BRIAN: Yeah. Does God exist? That idea has been contested a lot for hundreds of years. A lot of people basically give up on that. They see God act in their lives or in other people's lives but then don't want to get caught up in cultural conflict, so they explain it away. It's bad form to believe that God really works in our lives. It's part of culture war, part of lunging and jabbing.

JULIA: But if we were all patient, we would be able to believe the truth?

BRIAN: Well, it would be easier.

YOU: I know in my life, sometimes I have to overcome some kind of inner conflict, or outlast it, for me to be able to believe the objective truth.

BRIAN: Maybe the inner conflict was the real thing, and the objective truth is just your prize.

YOU: Like we really just live in our "lived lives"?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: That's like that Christian egoist guy saying that reality doesn't necessarily hold together, right?

BRIAN: Yeah, somehow reality is just what you experience it to be... and it's objective... and you don't know how.

YOU: But how do you communicate ideas like that to other people? Isn't that what's useful about reason? That we can come to consensus about a consistent external world?

JULIA: Do you believe me that I can have intuitive knowledge?

YOU: Yes, I do. I believe you.

JULIA: Can you explain how?

YOU: No. But I know that you know. Do you know how you know?

JULIA: No. But I know.

YOU: I think if I were a different kind of person, I wouldn't believe you.

JULIA: But you're not.

BRIAN: And some people are persuaded by reasonable arguments, while others find other arguments reasonable.

YOU: I believe Julia because she's sorrowful. Anyone who really knows the truth ought to be sorrowful.

BRIAN: She's not always sorrowful.

She looks at Brian like "What, are you kidding me?"

JULIA: I'm sorrowful.

Then she laughs.

YOU: Maybe I just believe her because I know her.

JULIA: You just see me right here and you know?

YOU: I would have believed you if the issue had come up at the end of our first conversation.

JULIA: How would you know from just seeing me after one conversation?

BRIAN: Yeah, there are a lot of ways that she might not be telling the truth, whether intentionally or by mistake.

YOU: I just know.

BRIAN: Maybe you know as part of your "lived life" and not in an objective way.

YOU: No, it all comes together.

BRIAN: What if it turns out not to be true?

YOU: I guess I'm taking a risk.

BRIAN: But you don't really know.

YOU: Do you doubt Julia?

BRIAN: On what specific topic?

YOU: About whether all of her dates are one man, or if they are different men.

BRIAN: No... I guess I don't... But if I think about it, I do.

YOU: When you relax and don't think about it..

BRIAN: Which is sort of like being patient..

YOU: What then?

BRIAN: I believe her.

YOU: What if it turns out she's wrong?

BRIAN: I think she and you and I are living in a reality in which she's right. We're living in a space of what God's speaking to us. It's like a landscape that we travel through. And then, if necessary, we'll have to leave this place and enter the one where she's mistaken. The contrary of what we believe wasn't true all along. It will only be true in the future, if it becomes more trustworthy for us to believe it then.

YOU: So then the only fact is that we exist, and that God exists, and that we're following him, from place to place....

BRIAN: Yeah. I'm trying this idea on, but I like it.

YOU: It's a good place to be in?

BRIAN: I think so. I'm not sure yet.

JULIA: I have to go.

She gets up to leave.

JULIA: I have to prepare lessons for my class tomorrow. Yeah, another life as a teacher...

YOU: Okay, see you later.

BRIAN: Bye.

She leaves.

You and Brian realize you have nothing to say about this topic anymore, and you've been at this cafe for a while and need to go to the bathroom. So you go to...

THE BATHROOM

A basic bathroom. The door locks, the faucet runs, the toilet flushes. Someone has put an air freshener in here but it doesn't smell too much like one. The paper towel dispenser appears to be broken but there's a roll sitting on a once-decorative table.

You use the toilet.

You feel better, and realize that you need to go for a walk.

You wash and dry your hands and exit the bathroom.

You approach Brian.

YOU: I've been sitting too much. You want to go for a walk?

BRIAN: No, I've got some reading to do. Maybe another time.

YOU: Okay. Well, see you later.

You gather your things and go.

You walk down the street. You walk down the street. You see a homeless person sleeping.

You walk past some pigeons. One of them flies away.

You go two blocks one way, turn, two blocks another, turn, two blocks another, turn, two blocks another, so that you arrive back where you started. Brian is still in the cafe but is busy reading so he doesn't see you through the glass.

You decide to call it a night.

[closing theme]

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COMMENTS

1. "Patience" is what we called "Memory" or "Concentration" when I was a kid... at least, that's what I remember. "Solitaire" referred to anything like the solitaire that was bundled with Windows 3.1. But now I learn that "Patience" is the broader name for a card game you play by yourself -- what I thought "solitaire" was. Perhaps this whole episode was premised on a faulty memory, or on a non-standard use of "patience".

Episode 13 - "Breaking the Devil's Backbone"

You slept in last night. Some nights you can't fall asleep for a while and then you have to catch up the next night. It's fine, it's the way it is, it's the way it has been.

It's Saturday morning, a little late in the morning. You feel a bit overslept, so you go for a walk, and that helps a little bit. You come back to your apartment and can't think of anything to do. Should you go to Mitzi's once again? Is your life nothing but that cafe and working? Yes, that's pretty much true. You wonder if you should try going to a different cafe. But you would still be going to a cafe.

You get through the two journal articles you have left to correct, and send them back to their authors. Then you look around your apartment and decide to do what you usually do.

You go to...

MITZI'S CAFE

Brian sits, actually nodding off!

You get your drink and sit down.

YOU: Hey.

You shake him a little.

BRIAN: Oh, oh! Hey.

YOU: You were sleeping.

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess I was drowsy.

YOU: Didn't get enough sleep last night?

BRIAN: Yeah. I got into a book.

YOU: A novel?

BRIAN: A biography.

YOU: I was up late not last night but the night before. I don't remember why now.

BRIAN: You sound kind of tired today.

YOU: Yeah, I slept in this morning.

BRIAN: I don't think I can do much with today.

YOU: Yeah, I know the feeling. I got some editing done, but I don't think I could do any writing.

BRIAN: What have you been working on?

YOU: Just stupid ideas. Maybe I'll have a good one.

BRIAN: Yeah. That happens. What's one of the better stupid ones?

YOU: I have this idea of a dream. It's not a dream I actually had, but I could have a character have it. It's about this place where everyone has to be one people. And the way that they make that happen is through empathy. And the way they have empathy is by understanding people. So if there are people they can't understand, they change them until they can understand them, and then they can have empathy on them.

BRIAN: That sounds kind of interesting.

YOU: Yeah. I can't think of how to make it into a story though. And who am I to say bad things about empathy?

BRIAN: You have some empathy.

YOU: I do.

BRIAN: Maybe you're the one who needs to say this. Only Nixon can go to China.

YOU: I don't think I'm a good enough writer to make much of a difference.

BRIAN: Yeah. I think from what you've showed me that you are a good writer, but you don't have whatever it is that makes people famous.

YOU: Yeah. Oh well.

BRIAN: Well, you might be able to get some people to read your writing. Maybe you could put it on a blog and 50 people could read it. 50 people is pretty good.

YOU: That's true. It's a lot better than 0.

BRIAN: But it's a good question whether people need to be dissuaded from being empathetic.

YOU: Yeah, I hope that story wouldn't dissuade people from being empathetic, but would help them understand that empathy has limits.

BRIAN: Or, in a way, the higher empathy is to know what it's like to be someone who isn't being understood by someone else, and to give them space.

YOU: Yeah. That makes sense.

BRIAN: Any other thoughts?

YOU: No, I guess I'm all out of thoughts.

BRIAN: I'm out of thoughts, too.

YOU: Maybe we should play a game.

BRIAN: Okay. Nothing too competitive or requiring too much thought.

YOU: Chutes and Ladders?

BRIAN: No, don't feel like playing that today.

YOU: Scrabble?

BRIAN: No, too competitive and too much thought.

YOU: Not Monopoly... that's no fun for two players.

BRIAN: Monopoly could be good, but, yeah, we played that recently.

YOU: I'll go look at the game shelf and see if there's anything we missed.

You look through the games on the shelf. Chess? No.
Checkers? No. The deck of cards might be good. Risk? No.
Then you see one that you've never heard of before, called
Breaking the Devil's Backbone. It's at the bottom of the stack
and you carefully remove it and lower the stack of games

above it, to rest where it was.

You bring it over to Brian, along with the deck of cards.

YOU: So here's a game that I don't know what it is. Also a deck of cards.

BRIAN: Let's look at the new game.

You open it up. It comes with a board folded into thirds. You unfold it. It comes with fake money and deeds to properties.

YOU: This looks like some kind of Monopoly clone.

BRIAN: There are rivers on here.

YOU: Okay... hm...

It appears to be a history-themed game. You read through the rule-book for a bit.

YOU: Okay, so it's like Monopoly. You start the game up at the starting places given by the "Bill of Lading" and then go down the river to Natchez, Mississippi. And then you sell your cargo and go up the trace to Nashville, Tennessee, and you can buy property along the way. And then everybody goes through over and over until someone runs out of money or something like that.

(You actually didn't read the rules too carefully, just skimmed them and read them.)

BRIAN: So wait, the idea is that you are ...?

YOU: You're a flatboatman during the time when the American South was the frontier. And you're going down the river to sell your cargo, but you have to get back over land, so you walk up the Natchez Trace from Natchez to Nashville.

BRIAN: Okay. So it's like Monopoly with a historical theme.

YOU: Right.

BRIAN: Huh, I wonder why this game is in this cafe...

YOU: I don't know. Do you want to play it?

BRIAN: What are these red and blue cards? Are they like chance cards?

YOU: They are Trace Hazards and River Hazards.

BRIAN: So they're like chance cards.

YOU: Right. "Hazard" and "chance" are related words.

BRIAN: I don't know if I want to play Monopoly again, even if there's a historical component.

You start to read the Trace Hazards out loud. There's something about the French exploring the Lower Mississippi Valley, and another thing about the founding of New Orleans. The cards are detailed, with names and dates. They involve the player character in history, like making them go to Natchez to congratulate the French (for building Fort Rosalie on the Natchez Bluff in 1716).

YOU: Oh, these Trace Hazard cards all have years on them. Oh... they're in chronological order.

BRIAN: Okay, so maybe this game is history-based. Like that's its claim to fame. I guess that is different than Monopoly.

YOU: So you want to play?

BRIAN: Yeah, it's not going to end up being all that competitive. We're just going to go through the motions and learn some history.

YOU: Okay, I'm in too.

BRIAN: What does the name of the game mean, though?

YOU: This piece of paper says that the Devil's Backbone is a term for the Natchez Trace, and breaking the Devil's Backbone is when you successfully make a trip up or down the Trace.

BRIAN: It's a vivid name.

YOU: You have to go through the process of commerce over and over, breaking the devil's backbone over and over.

BRIAN: That's an interesting image.

You choose your tokens. Neither of you wants to be the thief, so you decide not to have one. You draw your bill of lading card: You are from North Carolina and you start on the Cumberland River.

Brian draws his bill of lading card: He is from Indiana and he starts on the Wabash River. Both of you have cargo to sell in Natchez.

You start, and roll, and hit a river hazard. The river is flowing

slowly so you have to move slowly for the next three turns.

After you get done with your slow river curse, Brian hits a river hazard. Something about having too much stuff and needing to unload his boat, so he misses a few turns.

Eventually both of you make it to Natchez and start up the Trace. And you eventually make it to Nashville, working through some of the history. There's nothing to do today, so you keep playing, starting over with a new bill of lading, a new identity, to be drawn down the river only to have to walk your way over Satan's spine, breaking it over and over as though it's never been broken before and will never have to be broken again. Over and over, working through the history.

BRIAN: Who made this game?

YOU: It looks like it was basically self-published.

A woman approaches.

WOMAN (with a Southern accent): "Breaking the Devil's Backbone"... that's an interesting name.

YOU: Yes. This is a game about the Natchez Trace. The "Devil's Backbone" is a name for the Natchez Trace, and "Breaking" it is when you make it from one end to the other successfully.

WOMAN: I'm from Nashville. I've never been on the Natchez Trace though. Hi, my name is Abigail.

YOU: Beth.

BRIAN: Brian.

ABIGAIL: I'm here in California to visit relatives, but I came by this coffeeshop to pass some time.

BRIAN: I see you have a Bible with you.

ABIGAIL: Yes, I was reading the Bible when you said something about Nashville and it caught my attention.

BRIAN: Do you go to church in Nashville?

ABIGAIL: Yes, I do.

BRIAN: What kind of church?

ABIGAIL: We're a holiness church. We believe in overcoming our sinful

habits. As part of this we try to do good works for the Father.

BRIAN: How does that work?

ABIGAIL: We each find some sort of consuming fire ministry and then pursue it. And as we work, the Holy Spirit fills us and we don't sin.

BRIAN: Interesting. I like that idea.

ABIGAIL: God is a holy God.

BRIAN: What's your consuming fire ministry? Do you have one?

ABIGAIL: Actually, part of why I'm in this coffeeshop is to see how coffeeshops are in California. I want to make a place for students in Nashville to be able to study.

BRIAN: Is there anything specifically Christian about that?

ABIGAIL: Yes, there will be, if I get to do this plan. The coffeeshop will be called Abigail's, and that's not out of pride but because it will be my home away from home. I will practice hospitality there, and when people are around me, they will see the light that goes through me, which comes from Jesus Christ.

YOU: This is something you've been into all your life?

ABIGAIL: Not all of my life, but yes, for a while.

YOU: Huh, I wonder if there's a woman named Mitzi who owns this cafe... I never stopped to ask...

ALICIA: No, it's just a name. Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to eavesdrop!

ABIGAIL: No, don't worry about it. What's your name?

ALICIA: Alicia.

Abigail and Alicia talk about cafe business. Abigail is getting a free education.

You and Brian get back to your game. But you're thinking about Abigail, and apparently, she was thinking of you, turning back to your game.

ABIGAIL: Do either of you go to church?

YOU: No.

BRIAN: No, not regularly.

ABIGAIL: Are you a Christian?

BRIAN: No, but I do believe in God.

YOU: I don't believe in God.

ABIGAIL: You're playing a game about breaking the Devil's backbone. I think that's interesting.

YOU: Well, we didn't choose the game for the name but more because it was the only one we hadn't played recently.

ABIGAIL: Yes, I guess it might have been a coincidence.

YOU: But you're right. It is interesting.

ABIGAIL: If you believed in the Devil, would you want to break his backbone?

YOU: I don't even know how to do that. What is the Devil's backbone?

BRIAN: Something like walking up the Natchez Trace successfully?

YOU: Living life, I guess. Getting through life without getting ambushed.

ABIGAIL: That's interesting. How would that defeat the Devil?

YOU: I heard something one time, about how things get bigger if you fight them. So if you just live your life without getting drawn into something, the other thing doesn't have any power.

ABIGAIL: That does make sense. The Devil doesn't have a lot of power on his own. But he can use our minds to give him space to work.

YOU: I definitely believe in the Devil as a metaphor. Some ideas get in our heads and take us over, get us out of balance so that we're going around and around in circles.

ABIGAIL: The Devil only has to plant a seed and then he can go off somewhere else. Sometimes he comes after you like a lion. But he has more power if you don't know it's him.

YOU: Couldn't it be that we have feelings and we think that they're people, like that the Devil is a person? People are really good at making stories out of patterns.

ABIGAIL: That can be true. But there are times when you see enough to know.

BRIAN: How do you know?

ABIGAIL: Have you ever been in love with someone?

BRIAN: Sort of.

ABIGAIL: How about you, Beth?

YOU: Yes.

ABIGAIL: Did the other person love you?

BRIAN: I thought so.

YOU: Yes, he did.

ABIGAIL: How did you know, Beth?

YOU: There were signs. And then I knew.

ABIGAIL: When I was dating my husband, there was a time when I didn't know if he loved me back or not. I could think through all the evidence either way. It was all memories and little signs. And I couldn't figure it out, one way or another. And then I was talking to my best friend about it, and I just said all the different things that I thought might have been him loving me. And I didn't believe that he was in love with me when I started listing them. But then when I was done, I knew. Just saying it all out loud. So when God or the spiritual world talks to you, you get glimpses over time, and then eventually you have seen enough glimpses and you believe.

BRIAN: But you never know for certain, right?

ABIGAIL: No, you can know things.

BRIAN: Haven't you ever been wrong about something before? Maybe you're wrong now.

ABIGAIL: Yes, sometimes human beings are wrong. But Jesus said "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." So if you have been set free, you know the truth.

BRIAN: But that could be wrong. How do you know that Jesus really said that?

ABIGAIL: How do I know my husband loves me? If I examine it, I can always doubt it. But do I honestly believe that he doesn't? How would I be a bigger fool, to think he loves me, or that he doesn't?

BRIAN: I can see how it could be foolish to doubt that your spouse loves you.

ABIGAIL: Brian, you believe in God...

BRIAN: Yeah.

ABIGAIL: Is everything going to work out in the end?

BRIAN: Yeah. I think so.

ABIGAIL: So what's more important, to learn to trust that reality, or to be into the reality of the visible world?

BRIAN: I guess in the end we all have to trust the world where everything is good or else we can't be part of it.

ABIGAIL: Yes. I think that is true. The present world is passing away. So we have to learn to trust the new world.

BRIAN: You said that everything is going to work out in the end. But what about the people who go to hell?

ABIGAIL: First of all, I do not believe, and my church does not teach, that hell is permanent. The smoke rises forever but nobody lasts in hell forever. Secondly, nobody goes to be with the Father until they have overcome all of their sinful habits. But very few people have done this by the time they die. If I died today, I would not be ready for heaven. So God gives us another time to grow in holiness, during the 1,000 year reign of Christ after Jesus returns. So all the people who died without hearing about Jesus will have the chance to turn toward him. And most people will, eventually. But it's not inevitable. Some people will choose to reject Jesus, either by being open rebels against him or by not being interested in overcoming their sinful habits. God gives us free will and doesn't force us to love him.

BRIAN: I guess if he could he could just zap us to make us holy.

ABIGAIL: You don't zap people to make them truly love you.

BRIAN: Huh, so most people don't go to hell...

ABIGAIL: But a few people do.

BRIAN: That doesn't sound like absolutely everything works out in the end.

ABIGAIL: No, it's not perfect. But it's generally true that everything works out in the end.

YOU: So you don't get rid of fear from your thought system.

ABIGAIL: Fear is not evil. Fear can be used by evil, but it can also be used by good. Unfortunately, it's hard to find a balance. Maybe there can't be a perfect balance.

BRIAN: That's interesting.

YOU: Yeah, I never heard Christianity explained that way.

ABIGAIL: Our church started out pursuing holiness. And then as we kept studying the Bible, we came to understand what you've heard. I need to get back to my husband and my relatives, but it was very nice talking to you all. If you're ever in Nashville and if my cafe is open, I would love to treat you all to some coffee or tea.

You and Brian laugh.

ABIGAIL: I know that your plane tickets would be much greater than the value of the coffee or tea, but it's also valuable to see a friendly face in a strange city.

You both are quieted.

BRIAN: Yeah. No, thank you for the conversation. I think about philosophy and religion all the time and this is giving me food for thought.

ABIGAIL: That's good. Okay, Beth and Brian, goodbye!

She walks out of the cafe and down the street and out of sight.

You return to your game.

YOU: Huh, she left an impression on you.

BRIAN: Yeah. Where do all these people come from?

YOU: All these religious people?

BRIAN: There was that guy who was into selling, too.

YOU: I don't know. I kind of don't expect religious people in this city.

BRIAN: Well, I guess Abigail was from Tennessee, so that makes sense.

YOU: You don't see a lot of Southerners in this city.

BRIAN: No... even fewer people from the Midwest or New England.

YOU: There are some, but yeah.

BRIAN: Where do people come from?

YOU: I don't know, Brian. You mean something like, what are the cultural roots of people?

BRIAN: Yeah. Southerners come from the South, and Midwesterners come from the Midwest. Immigrants come from other countries. But where do people come from?

YOU: I don't know. Maybe from evolution?

BRIAN: There's two kinds of people. The people you see when you scrutinize the visible world. Then there is the person you are in yourself, which observes the visible world, scrutinizing it, or not. And the other people who are like that. And the scrutinized person appears to come from evolution, but we don't really know that we do come from evolution...

YOU: But it might be foolish to think that we don't...

BRIAN: Right. That might be true. But be that as it may, there's the unscrutinized reality.

YOU: And if that's more fundamental than the scrutinized, where do we come from then?

BRIAN: Yeah. Where does *that* come from?

YOU: Maybe from a person? From God?

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess that's the answer.

YOU: Maybe we can't know the answer.

BRIAN: Or we're fools to not desire to know the answer.

YOU: Maybe so.

BRIAN: How do you feel about this?

You pause to think.

YOU: I don't know. I guess I don't want to believe something that isn't true, just to believe something at all. But yeah, what Abigail said about being a fool to not believe when there is an answer... that's kind of sitting with me. I don't know. Here we are at the table. We broke the Devil's backbone a few times.

BRIAN: Yeah... it's like we usually don't have the answer at the end of a conversation.

YOU: But that doesn't mean we never will have some of the answers.

BRIAN: Or even the overall answer.

YOU: We're never going to have all the individual answers.

BRIAN: No.

You and Brian put the game away and then leave the cafe and part ways. You take the bus to nowhere (somewhere) and back. Then you go to a restaurant with one of your friends and talk for a while about her problems. Then you go home and watch a DVD you had checked out from the library. And then you go to bed.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 13 "Breaking the Devil's Backbone"

Written 10 April 2019

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COMMENTS

(no comment)

ACT IV

Episode 14 - "Alte Stadt"

Your phone rings. It's Julia.

JULIA: "Hey, I'm outside your a[incomprehensible]"

YOU: "My apartment?"

JULIA: "Yeah."

YOU: "OK, see you in a minute."

You're ready for this trip. You've been ready, for 20 minutes. Julia is not precisely on time. You get your bag packed with all the necessities and open the apartment door, close it and lock it and walk out to the curb and the car. You open the passenger side door and enter...

INTERIOR OF JULIA'S CAR

Julia drives a compact car from a bygone decade. The inside is normally scattered with papers and whatever else, but has been cleaned up for this trip. Possibly this clean-up job is the reason why Julia is a little late. The car smells a little like Julia and a lot like the jar of potpourri she has in there.

JULIA (when you point to it): It makes it smell like Christmas, like when I was a little girl.

The fabric on the ceiling of the car sags around one of the edges. Fortunately the ceiling has one of those handles you can hold, to give your hand something to do on a long car ride. You buckle up.

YOU: Yeah, I remember potpourri. Potpourri came before incense.

JULIA: Yeah. You're buckled now. Okay, next stop is Brian's place.

Traffic is horrible in a fast, busy, death-inviting way, and you don't want to distract Julia as she tries to keep you both alive. After about ten minutes, you arrive in front of Brian's apartment. He's waiting in front, wearing sunglasses and standing on one foot. He gets his backpack and puts it on as he walks over to the passenger side door.

This old car is a coupe, so you get out and make the seat go forward and Brian sits in the back, putting his backpack at his feet. He's a little less than average height for an American man, and he's a good sport.

YOU: Hey Brian. Ready for the adventure?

BRIAN: The adventure is constantly underway.

YOU: Are you ready for this side quest?

BRIAN: Yeah. I brought sunscreen in case anyone needs it.

You three are going to Alte Stadt, the site of the original Hoheres Wesen, from which all of Hoheres Wesen eventually extruded. It's just a little ways away. It looks like you'll be stuck in traffic for an hour and a half.

There are two ways to get to Alte Stadt from the part of town where the three of you live. You can take the bus, or you can drive. If you really want you can take the light rail, but you end up having to make more connections than the bus, so it doesn't save you any time. If you drive, you'll be stuck in traffic. The driver will switch her foot from gas to brakes, over and over, as you dutifully move yourselves forward, as a dutiful particle within the flow. You're only doing what anyone else would do. If you take the bus, you can travel in relative comfort, but because you have to wait for the bus, and then make a connection, and the bus gets stuck in traffic itself, anyway, you end up taking two and a half hours instead of one and a half. Pretty soon there isn't very much day left at the destination.

Actually, if you really wanted to, you could ride a bike there. But you can't go on the interstate if you ride a bike, and it ends up taking a long time.

As long as all these modes of transportation take, they are all

faster than walking.

You three weighed your options and Julia was willing to drive the rest of you. Hopefully there will be parking.

JULIA: Okay, on the freeway now. Do you guys mind if I turn up my music?

YOU: No, that's okay.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's fine.

YOU: Actually, I brought a CD, if you want to hear it later.

JULIA: What is it?

YOU: It's a Suzanne Vega CD.

JULIA: Sure, let's play it now.

You get it out of the case and put it in the car's CD player.

JULIA: Are you a Suzanne Vega fan?

YOU: I was at the record store one afternoon, and I saw this CD. I remembered the name from when I was a kid. I think I liked one of her songs on the radio.

JULIA: Is it on this CD?

YOU: There's something familiar about a couple of the tracks, so maybe yeah. It's from the right time period to be something I heard in elementary school.

BRIAN: Are you a Suzanne Vega fan now?

YOU: I like this CD alright. Maybe I will become a Suzanne Vega fan.

The three of you are sailing along nicely until you all hit traffic.

YOU: What are we going to do when we get to Alte Stadt?

BRIAN: You have say it the German way. Alte Stadt. [He says "All-tuh Shtat"]

YOU: Do you know a lot of German?

BRIAN: Just what I read in philosophy books. I got curious one time and tried to teach myself to pronounce it right, but I don't think I really have it. The "sh" in Stadt I got from hearing people pronounce Wittgenstein ["Vit

gin shtine" (hard "g")].

JULIA: Is he a philosopher?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: What was his philosophy about?

BRIAN: I never really read him much but it was something about how language works. We play games with language, and that's where meaning comes from. Or something like that.

JULIA: Kind of like how you can figure out that someone is being sarcastic?

BRIAN: Yeah... I think so. Not sure if Wittgenstein ever talked about that.

JULIA: Or like when people say the same word over and over, and nobody really means it anymore.

BRIAN: Like because they don't act on it, it doesn't really mean anything?

JULIA: Like if people talk about how good love is, but they don't mean it anymore. So you can say that love is good, and people can agree with you, but the word "good" doesn't mean "people are going to be into this" anymore.

BRIAN: Yeah. That's something Wittgenstein might have talked about.

JULIA: I like this guy Wittgenstein. Witt-gen-stein ["Vit - gin - shtine"]. How is that spelled?

BRIAN: W I T T G E N S T E I N

JULIA: Oh, so not Wittgenstein? ["Vit - jen - shtine"]

BRIAN: No, I think in German "g"s are usually "hard".

JULIA: So the word "German" isn't a German word?

BRIAN: I don't think so. The German word for "German" is "Deutsche".

JULIA: How is that spelled?

BRIAN: D E U T S C H E

JULIA: That's an interesting spelling.

(For some reason, you're not as interested in German pronunciation and you look out the window at the nearby car stuck in traffic. But you can't help hearing and attending to what's happening in the car.)

BRIAN: Yeah, the "e u" pair makes an "oy" sound.

JULIA: So the Teutonic ["Too tawn ic"] knights should really be called the Teutonic ["Toy tawn ic"] knights?

BRIAN: I don't know. I think the word is pronounced Teutonic ["Too tawn ic"]. What were they?

JULIA: I don't know, I just remember that my brother was part of, like, a nation of LARPerS, or a guild or a clan or something, called the Teutonic Knights.

BRIAN: Huh... How far back in the past do your pasts go, if that makes sense?

JULIA: I think all the pasts I have could be from people who are alive now. I've never had pasts that go back more than 80 years. But it's hard to tell because childhood memories are kind of fuzzy.

BRIAN: Okay. You must pick up a lot of random knowledge from your pasts.

JULIA: That was my real brother! He really liked LARPing.

BRIAN: Does he still do it?

JULIA: Not anymore. He's too busy now.

BRIAN: That's too bad.

JULIA: Yeah, but he's happy anyway. Yeah, I do learn a lot of things, but I also forget them because there are so many to remember. There's a lot of different things in my mind all at once.

BRIAN: But you just say one thing at a time.

JULIA: Yeah, usually.

BRIAN: Like quantum physics. A particle is doing whatever it wants until the wave function collapses and then it's one thing.

JULIA: Is that what quantum physics is?

BRIAN: I think it's part of it.

JULIA: Wasn't one of the quantum physics people named Heisenberg?

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: How do you spell that?

BRIAN: H E I S E N B E R G

JULIA: That's funny. It's not Heisenberg ["Hey zen burg"]?

BRIAN: No, the "e i" pair is pronounced "eye".

JULIA: Okay. Were any of the other quantum physics guys from Germany? Or have German names?

BRIAN: There's always Schrödinger ["Shrohdinge"].

JULIA: How do you spell that?

BRIAN: S C H R Ö D I N G E R

JULIA: "O umlaut"?

BRIAN: Yeah. I don't think English speakers pronounce Schrödinger's name right.

JULIA: How is it really pronounced?

BRIAN: Schrödinger ["Shruhdinge"]. No, that's not quite right. Okay, "o umlaut" is different than "o". The way you say it is you say "eh" with your lips in the shape of an "o".

JULIA: "Ö"

BRIAN: Right.

JULIA: "Ö ö ö ö"...

BRIAN: Okay, so it's Schrödinger ["Shrödinger"].

JULIA: Schrödinger. ["Shrurdinge"] No. That's not right.

You don't even try to pronounce foreign words.

JULIA: Schrödinger. ["Shrödinger"] I got it! For now. I can see why people don't want to say Schrödinger's ["Shrohdinge's"] name right. Some of them can say it right but some people can't and the ones who can't think that the ones who can are showing off. So then the people who can don't want to look like they're showing off, so they say Schrödinger ["Shrohdinge"] instead. But why do people say Wittgenstein ["Vit gin shtine"] instead of Wittgenstein ["Wit gin stine"]?

BRIAN: I've heard some people say Wittgenstein ["Vit gin stine"]. But most people say Wittgenstein ["Vit gin shtine"].

JULIA: So some people are trying to not show off, but they still say some of the showing-off sounds. But they're not really showing off how they're not showing off.

BRIAN: Yeah, people try to abide by rules, their own personal rules about what kind of person they want to be. Or how they want to be perceived.

JULIA: You're more the kind of person who obeys the rules that make you

who you want to be, rather than the rules that make you be perceived a certain way.

BRIAN: That's what you perceive.

JULIA: Haha, okay, what's the truth then?

BRIAN: Okay, yeah, you're half right. Half the time I obey the rules that make me into the person I want to be. The other half the time I just do what I have to do.

JULIA: Because someone makes you do it?

BRIAN: That's the third half of the time.

Julia laughs. Brian's in her element.

JULIA: I'm just messing with you. I know what you mean. There are some things you just have to do.

YOU: I think for me it's more like there are things that I end up doing.

BRIAN: No, it's definitely like there are things I have to do.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: Interesting. Do these things make any sense?

JULIA: They don't have to. They just are.

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: Usually they make sense.

YOU: I think mine make sense, but I think it's because I organize my life around my well-being, so things tend to get woven into some kind of chain of events that leads to my well-being.

BRIAN: I think that sometimes, but sometimes I think it's God.

JULIA: It's definitely the Universe.

YOU: Like there's some kind of intelligence that does it?

JULIA: Yes.

YOU: Or is it because reality is inherently narrative and creates patterns impersonally?

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: Both of them at different times?

JULIA: All I know is that everything, like the whole universe, is one thing,

and it sets things up, and it's not God.

You suddenly realize you need to go the bathroom, but you figure you can hold it.

Julia and Brian go on talking about something, but you tune them out. Suzanne Vega finishes playing and Julia asks you if you have any more CDs. You reply that you do not.

JULIA: Okay, could you look in the glove box for my adowa CD?

YOU: Adowa?

JULIA: Yeah, it's a burned CD. It says, "Adowa".

You duly search and find it and put it in the CD player, after removing the Suzanne Vega CD and putting it in its case.

A woman sings something by herself, and then a chorus replies, and then the drums begin.

JULIA: This is funeral music. It's dancing music, and it's remembering music.

BRIAN: Funeral music?

JULIA: From West Africa.

BRIAN: It's interesting.

JULIA: I like this way to grieve better.

BRIAN: So if we outlive you, we should play this at your funeral?

JULIA: You can play whatever you want at my funeral. It's your funeral.

They laugh, but being in this car is getting to you.

YOU: Is it okay if I turn up the AC?

BRIAN: I'm fine.

JULIA: I'm okay, but you can adjust the vent.

You forgot about adjusting the vent, after so long not being in cars.

YOU: How much longer?

JULIA: We're through a lot of the traffic. Maybe 40 more minutes?

You calculate -- technically it's not really calculating that you're doing -- that your bladder can hold until you make it to one of Alte Stadt's public restrooms.

YOU: You think that includes the time it would take to find parking?

JULIA: Oh yeah, add another 15 minutes to that.

You recalculate, and because you're stretching a previous yes, you figure you can make it.

Brian and Julia talk about who knows what as you sink into reverie. Alte Stadt... when was the last time you were there? It was probably when you were dating Robert. You wonder if things have changed much there in Alte Stadt. You seem to remember that the company that ran the concessions there left and a new company came in. So maybe the shops would be different. Do you remember the shops specifically? No, not really. They tended to be German-themed.

If it weren't for the fact that you were getting a headache and felt slightly claustrophobic in the car and you had to go to the bathroom, you would be getting relaxed enough in the afternoon sun to go to sleep. You can hear the gratingness of Julia's and Brian's voices either as an irritant or as a file filing away your consciousness. Why are you three going to Alte Stadt today? Oh, it was some comment one of you made about something... something about wanting to learn more about the history of your town... to learn it again... we are always learning the history again... we must choose to revisit our history... sit through traffic for our history... we can't erase everything that was, or live for everything that is to come... we must remember things... Alte Stadt is a strange way to remember things... Alte Stadt is an expensive place, it costs a lot of money to run... Alte Stadt is us trying to remember... You and Robert, in Alte Stadt, eating ice cream... You and Robert, at a bar in Alte Stadt, drinking beers... big beer steins ["shtigns"]... no, you called them steins ["stigns"]... the others there with you... his birthday... walking out on the street next to him, the others walking before and behind... the others gone... who were the others?... you start to remember what they said to you... what they did with what they said to you... you're over it now... Alte Stadt, the past costs so much to remember... only the best of the past... and the worst... that

time you went with Robert to Anderson Reservoir...

And your reverie goes on, idle thoughts which you know don't have any inherent relationship to your present-day experiences. Or if they do, they're like cheap talk, they're memories that don't mean what they would have meant when you were younger and you did what you thought, all the time. You know that you're thinking about Robert, and you wonder if that means anything, but Robert is very far away right now, and it's the first time you've thought of him in weeks or even months. You're not entirely sure how long it's been, because you haven't been keeping track.

And then Julia makes it off the freeway, and the ramp dumps you three into downtown Hoheres Wesen.

DOWNTOWN

Tall buildings, neither skyscrapers nor walk-ups, house people on top of retail. Homeless people, drunk people, lower-income people walk around. Cars that are expensive are going places. Deeper into downtown there are true skyscrapers, buildings too expensive to house poor tenants. People are going places to do things, people are draining the cups of their lives on the ground. You three get stuck behind a bus, and then Julia makes a confident and desperate lane change, speeds ahead of the bus, and slips into a convenient gap to return to the rightmost lane. Alte Stadt is somewhere on the right.

BRIAN: How are you doing, Julia?

JULIA: I'm fine.

BRIAN: I'm okay but I have to go to the bathroom.

YOU: Me too.

JULIA: Well, hopefully we find parking near Alte Stadt.

BRIAN: How was it going through traffic?

JULIA: I'm used to it. My jobs change all the time and I just have to wake up early when they're far from my apartment.

BRIAN: When I'm in traffic, my leg starts to get tired from going from gas to brakes. But this car is a manual transmission, so you have to hold down the clutch, too.

JULIA: Yeah...

BRIAN: I don't think I could do that.

JULIA: You get used to it.

BRIAN: I'd offer to drive back but I'm not good with stick-shift.

YOU: I don't know how to drive stick-shift.

JULIA: Do you have a license?

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: I guess that's a good thing to have in this city.

She circles around several blocks but can't find any parking.

JULIA: It looks like we're going to have to find a pay lot somewhere and walk.

BRIAN: I've got some cash.

YOU: Me too.

JULIA: Okay.

She finds a pay lot that is somewhat expensive and somewhat far away, and you park, get out, Julia locks her car and pays and you contribute your share and you get on the sidewalk and head toward Alte Stadt.

You feel a measured urgency as you walk toward Alte Stadt, each footfall taking you a few feet closer to the public restrooms of Alte Stadt.

Then you find yourselves entering the gates of Alte Stadt.

ALTE STADT, EAST GATE

The east gate is a double gate, with an ironwork gate on the outside, and an ironwork gate on the inside.

The outer layer of Alte Stadt consists of outdoor restaurants in the style of Bavarian villages, but built out of adobe. There are a few surviving buildings from the 19th century in Alte Stadt, but many of them are reconstructions done faithfully in the style of the old days. The German immigrants who founded Alte Stadt by and large were not from Bavaria, but

Americans well know what German restaurants are supposed to look like, and Alte Stadt does not call them misinformed. You pass through the east gate, through the inner gate, and enter the Plaza.

PLAZA

As you enter into Alte Stadt, you see a plaza in a Spanish style. This is an authentic feature, is in fact the very site of the original plaza which they built. The founders liked the plazas they had seen in Mexico City, where they stopped on their way to Alta California.

In the plaza, off to one side, there is an informational sign.

YOU: I see a bathroom over there.

You and Brian head over and you each go into the appropriate bathrooms for your genders.

Having used the bathrooms, you return to Julia, who returns you to the sign.

BRIAN: Let's look at this sign.

YOU: Okay.

BRIAN: "Founded in 1831, Hoheres Wesen was an idealistic experiment led by a pair of German professors, Hans-Georg Müller and Peter Baecker. Both were inspired by the philosophies of the German Enlightenment, Kant and particularly Hegel among them. They founded a youth movement in the universities where they taught, in Berlin and Jena, drawing in students and young people from other towns and cities as well. Baecker's brother was a frontiersman and somewhat of a con artist, but his descriptions of Alta California were honest enough to not mislead the professors, and they decided that they should leave the decadent European climate to start anew, to create a current of thought in pure isolation which could then return to Europe -- a 'Germany away from Germany, to bless Germany', as their slogan went. After initial problems with their water supply and with disease, the colony took root and grew a little. But subsequent waves of Mexican and American immigration wholly shaped the character of Hoheres Wesen, which only retained the name given by its founders -- Hoheres Wesen. The last native-speaking German speakers, descended from the original band of students, died in the 1950s."

JULIA: There's a button.

BRIAN: "The modern pronunciation of Hoheres Wesen is first attested in a political cartoon from the *Hoheres Wesen Times* in 1921. At that time, the city was not very large. The caption reads "'Have you heard of Hoheres Wesen?' "Who's Horace Wesson?'"

JULIA: That is how we say it.

BRIAN: "When Hoheres Wesen was annexed to the United States after the Mexican-American War, gradually American settlers caused the pronunciation to shift toward a frontier-ish 'Horace Wesson'. The spelling changed from Höheres Wesen to Hoheres Wesen. But the German-speaking inhabitants called it by its original name, Höheres Wesen. Press the button below to hear how one of them might have pronounced the name to this city which is now home to over four million Americans."

YOU: Okay.

You press the button.

SIGN: Höheres Wesen. ["Höherus Veyzn"]

JULIA: Höheres Wesen. ["Hrrhrrus Veysen"]

You push the button again.

SIGN: Höheres Wesen. ["Höherus Veyzn"]

YOU: Höheres Wesen. ["Huheherus Veysin"] I give up. Hoheres Wesen. ["Horus Wesun"] I'm an American.

JULIA: I was doing better with the ö in the car.

BRIAN: I'm thirsty.

JULIA: I see a water fountain over there.

Brian goes and drinks from it. You can hear in the air the sound of a tuba, drum kit, accordion and saxophone playing "Dust in the Wind". It's not quite schlager style, despite the instrumentation.

Then, as Brian returns, the band starts playing "Heroes" by David Bowie. This version seems to be as faithful as the band can make it, and is somewhat moving, the saxophone playing the vocal part. You walk around the plaza, seeing all kinds of tourists.

BRIAN: So the sign didn't say this, but do you know the meaning of Hoheres Wesen?

JULIA: Do you?

BRIAN: It means "higher being" or "higher essence". I guess the founders wanted their city to be a new kind of thing. But I think the term comes from Hegel, or Kant, and I'm not sure all the connotations it has there.

JULIA: Any bad connotations?

BRIAN: Maybe. Only philosophically bad.

YOU: Maybe they just liked the basic idea and didn't worry about what Kant or Hegel said. Like they were starting fresh with what the word basically meant.

JULIA: There are so many times where I want to say something and people around me already know some other meaning to it and I can't say what I really mean.

YOU and BRIAN (simultaneously): Yes.

BRIAN: I'll say something like "That wasn't my favorite experience" and I mean exactly that. It wasn't bad. It just wasn't my favorite.

JULIA: And then people are so sure that you're saying "I hated it and I'm saying that in a colorful way".

BRIAN: And then there are all the sexual innuendoes.

JULIA: People never get tired of those.

BRIAN: Sometimes when you're with the right people, you can forget about them. Like the people around you break your inner language, take your mind places you wouldn't ordinarily go.

JULIA: Yeah. And then other people make your mind be normal again.

YOU: It's the weird people who make things normal.

BRIAN: No, they're the normal people.

YOU: Yeah. Okay. I see that.

JULIA: Are you guys hungry?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: I see a restaurant over there.

BRIAN: Looks like all the other restaurants.

YOU: Let's go there.

You wait and get a seat and sit and talk. Julia tells stories

from her pasts. Brian talks about his parents and siblings. You don't have as much to say today, but you listen.

Julia ordered some schnitzel. It's okay. Brian ordered Bratwurst mit Sauerkraut. He says it's okay. You ordered the Berliner Salad, a concession to California which is apparently in the style of hip modern-day German cuisine. You say it's okay. You pay for the meals because Julia drove and Brian pays you back for his part but runs out of cash.

YOU: Don't worry about it.

BRIAN: Okay.

Then you go back out into the sunshine and walk around aimlessly.

Why are you here? You're here to pass time, to bond, or not, to see whatever happens, and thus to be able to bond in a relaxed way. Or are you just passing time? You risk to just pass time -- maybe you only ever pass time. You walk around. Maybe in Brian's way of thinking, you're with God now, hearing him speak all your surroundings to you. Maybe in Julia's way of thinking, you're existing, taking your place in the universe. You don't feel bonded to your friends at all by this experience, but you wouldn't rather be anywhere else right now, except that Alte Stadt is hot today, and you would have been happier eating food from home, and Mitzi's is a nice place, or a hike, or anywhere but Alte Stadt would be better than Alte Stadt, but here you are with Brian and Julia, and what place could you prefer over reality? And you want to be with them right now. Not with any feeling of yearning or warmth, but just as a fact.

A store catches Brian's attention and you three enter.

CHECKPOINT CHARLIE'S

A not-too-large, somewhat cramped store which is Berlin-themed. Yes, there is a poster of the album *Heroes* on the wall. There are the T-shirts for sale. "Ich Bin Ein Berliner", "I ♥ Berlin", "Schland!!!!". One of them commemorates the fall of the Berlin Wall with the word "Freiheit". You can buy vials of the Berlin Wall with certificates of authenticity for \$50. You

can buy a DVD of a Bertolt Brecht production. You wonder if anything has happened in Berlin since 1989, but can't think of anything specifically. A lot has happened in your life, and you can hardly name that anymore. Does the fall of the Berlin Wall mean as little to Germany as that epiphany you had 15 years ago that let you get over that one person? Maybe it means a little more to them. Modern people get good at getting over things.

You filter out of the shop and share your thoughts with Brian and Julia.

JULIA: Yeah, I know what you're talking about. You learn to get beyond things and then you can't hold on to anything.

BRIAN: I think about different ethnic groups that hold on to their enmities for generations. Maybe it's good to get over things.

YOU: But wouldn't it be better to not hold on to enmity but to still hold on to the past? If the past doesn't have significance, you learn to not find any significance in the present.

BRIAN: Because the present is just going to become the past?

YOU: And you're just going to forget it.

BRIAN: Interesting. So maybe you just remember the good times?

YOU: But that's a falsification of the past. So, having the real past, the good and bad, but without it making you an enemy of other people.

JULIA: Not everyone is ready to hear about the bad things they've done. Some people are, but not all people are.

BRIAN: Maybe it's better that we just live in a present that is constantly slipping away into unreality. At least, that seems realistic.

YOU: You're too young to be saying that.

BRIAN: Or maybe I'm just old enough.

YOU: Here we are in Alte Stadt, the idealistic birthplace of Hoheres Wesen, and we're talking about realism?

BRIAN: Well, look around you. This is the reality of Alte Stadt.

You can see a man in costume lecturing in a theatrical way (on some sort of 19th century topic, no doubt), to some Japanese tourists, in Germanic-sounding English.

YOU: No, Brian, there has to be a deeper reality. You of all people. You believe in God.

BRIAN: I believe in the moment, too.

JULIA: I have to live in the moment. I can't handle memory. I used to have the muscles for it, but not any more.

YOU: There has to be some kind of deeper reality.

BRIAN: Maybe God will show it to us someday.

YOU: You say that without conviction.

BRIAN: Well, hope is the conjunction of desire and likelihood. I guess I just don't desire reality all that much. I do see how memory can bring reality to the present. But feel the breeze.

It is a nice breeze.

BRIAN: We're well-fed. Yes, we're eating the fat of the earth. But no one will fault us for it. We can walk around with guiltless consciences, like most everyone around us.

There is a non-operational cannon in the plaza, and a toddler boy plays on it next to his mother and father.

BRIAN: I agree with Malcolm X. We're living in heaven on earth. But he thought things could be different. They can't. It's our fate to have these lives of ease and beauty. And since we can't do anything about it, we might as well call it a good thing and enjoy it.

YOU: You really believe that?

BRIAN: No. But I don't have any energy to fight it.

JULIA: What do you really believe in?

BRIAN: I'm with Beth. There has to be something more than this. There's nothing that can be said against all these people walking around, chilling out in the sun. Nothing to be said against heaven on earth. I can't really say anything against people for not caring about the millions of hungry people, or the people who work themselves to exhaustion to make products we buy for cheap. No, I have nothing to say against that. No words will come out of my mouth, that will produce no actions. But still, there has to be something more real than this.

JULIA: I think people can be called out on what they do.

BRIAN: Be my guest, come up with a new way to call them out.

JULIA: I agree with you two. I think if this is heaven on earth, this is fake heaven. And all of America is fake heaven, and the cathedrals of Europe are fake heaven. Even though they are beautiful. And the love of parents for children is fake love. There are moments when there is real love, here and there. But the love that people think is love is so often fake. Prosperity is fake, and wealth is fake. Everything people work for is fake. There are only a few moments of reality. And there are real people. I think that real people are those who really care about other people.

BRIAN: I would say it's also people who trust very well.

JULIA: I think you have to have both. If you can't trust, you can't genuinely care. And if you don't care, you're not trusting.

BRIAN: You're not trusting other people's realities.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: But look around at Alte Stadt. What is there to care about here? I mean, I could say the same most of the time in Mitzi's, or anywhere in Hoheres Wesen.

BRIAN: Sometimes you can't.

YOU: But aren't we as a society pushing and pushing toward scenes like this? Look at all these people walking around. Do you see any frowns? No one is murdering or stealing from anyone else. The government affords us all freedom of the press, assembly, and speech, and we walk around frankly, as citizens. The foreign tourists are happy in our home. There are no police officers in sight. Our society is succeeding here and now. Nothing to care about, except for the parents with their toddlers.

BRIAN: So people will cherish the years they have children so that they can really care?

YOU: Parents care about their children all their lives. It's the childless who are condemned to fake lives.

JULIA: I don't think even the care that parents have for their children is real all the time. It's usually just an instinct which they don't deeply choose. It's good that they have that instinct for practical reasons, but it doesn't touch their deepest hearts.

YOU: Have you ever been a parent?

JULIA: A mother -- many times.

A man interrupts you all.

MAN: Sorry to interrupt you all.

He speaks with a deep voice, slowly, with what sounds to be an authentic German accent.

MAN: I myself am from Germany. I find this place atrocious as well. I don't want to get into all the reasons as I am sure you are all aware of them yourselves.

BRIAN: Is Germany any more real than Southern California?

MAN: In some superficial ways, yes. But your basic feeling is correct there as well as here. Everything is fake. I am fake, you are fake, we all are fake.

YOU: And the fact that we're all fake doesn't make it any better.

MAN: No, no, not at all. It actually makes it worse.

BRIAN: One thing that I am realizing is that all I can do is wait for God.

MAN: Yes, God can save us. We can't save ourselves.

BRIAN: Are you a believer?

MAN: Yes, I believe that God is real. Listen, I have to go now and find my wife. She goes off to stores and buys things without me. But you should go visit the Temple of Philosophy here. You shouldn't miss it. Farewell!

You return his farewell, and he walks off, looking around.

BRIAN: I didn't know there was a Temple of Philosophy here.

JULIA: Maybe there's a map somewhere.

YOU: I see one over there.

You walk over to the man-tall map. "YOU ARE HERE" says the map at a point on the plaza. You didn't realize there was so much to look at in Alte Stadt, so many different stores and a few historical buildings. You look around the map for a fraction of a minute and then find the Temple of Philosophy. It's a few blocks west of the plaza.

You three make your way through the moderate crowd and exit the plaza on the west side, and continue until you reach the Temple of Philosophy.

It's not a very large building, but it does have a pleasing shape, a square building with a pyramidal roof rising to a brass or bronze dome. This is one of the original buildings, although the dome had to be replaced some years ago.

Inside is cool and quiet, the thick adobe walls keeping out the heat. No one else is inside except a docent. The building is dimly lit with electric lights made to look like candles.

You see a bust labeled Plato and a bust labeled Aristotle on opposite walls, staring into each other's eyes. There is a dais and old wooden chairs set out so that people could listen to a lecture. The walls with the busts each have bookshelves, with books. The docent explains that they're all in German and thus do not interest most tourists.

BRIAN: Are these original books?

DOCENT: No, these are reproductions. The original books are in a collection at the University of Hoheres Wesen.

BRIAN: May I look at one of them?

DOCENT: Certainly.

Brian looks around for a bit, but of course his German is not up to the task of whatever it is he's found. It's something by Hegel, you can make out on the spine. Julia looks over his shoulder.

JULIA: The word "Geist" ["Guysht"] is on there a few times.

BRIAN: Actually, you say that "Geist" ["Guyst"].

JULIA: Oh, so when do you say "Sht" and when do you say "St"?

BRIAN: I think it's when the "s t" pair comes before a vowel. In "Geist", it comes at the end of the word.

JULIA: Okay. I notice that a lot of the words are capitalized.

BRIAN: That's how they do things in German. Certain kinds of nouns are always capitalized.

JULIA: What does "Geist" mean?

BRIAN: It can mean different things. "Idea", "spirit", "ghost" are three big meanings.

JULIA: Huh. So it's like where philosophy and spirituality meet, in one word.

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess so.

He puts the book back on the shelf (first closing it).

YOU: You're basically an idealist, aren't you Brian?

BRIAN: You mean that I believe everything is mind or idea?

YOU: Yeah, isn't that what you've said before?

BRIAN: I don't know if that's quite right. Maybe it's right. I think there are some kinds of idealism I don't believe in. But I do think everything that exists are minds and ideas, and they're of the same type of being so they can interact. Or maybe it's just minds, and the way a mind sees a mind is as ideas. But those minds aren't ideas, so I don't think it makes sense to call what I believe idealism. Because the minds are persons, the label could be personalism, and that's something that people have applied to things before. That's probably a better label than idealism, in my opinion.

YOU: I guess it makes sense. So when two minds meet, what happens?

BRIAN: The only minds that really meet are God's mind and each of his creature's minds. And when they do, they share the exact same experiences. Those are what they communicate to each other. A standing word.

YOU: Couldn't there be some other way things could be?

BRIAN: Maybe so, what do you have in mind?

YOU: Well, if the two minds are interacting, like God's mind and your mind, then you would see God as the scene you see in front of you and God would see something too, but we're not sure what he sees.

BRIAN: Do you think I see the same things you do when you see God?

YOU: Assuming your idea is correct, that we see other minds? No, I see something different.

BRIAN: Okay, hmm... So you see a different part of God, maybe?

YOU: Yeah, that would make sense.

BRIAN: What is a mind if not a bundle of experience?

YOU: It's a person, right?

BRIAN: Right, so there's some kind of unity to it that makes it a person.

All this going on inside the Temple of Philosophy. You have left Julia and the docent to their own concerns. At this moment, you are unaware of what they're doing.

YOU: Right, that makes sense.

BRIAN: So if we're made out of experience, how can we contact another

set of experiences except by sharing experiences?

YOU: Maybe through a relationship. We never know anything about anybody else's experiences. But we can put out a signal which has effects inside other people's worlds that we are completely unaware of, and then they send out signals that affect us in ways that they are completely unaware of. But then we affect them in a way that causes them to affect us in a certain way that we know. It's like our actions on them produce an effect on us that we do know. And if we like that effect, we keep putting out the signal that causes us to receive that effect. And then they do the same thing, because the signals lead to each other. So we're connected in a relationship, but not any closer than that.

BRIAN: That's interesting. I still like it better to think that we share our exact experiences with God.

YOU: Yeah, I just made up that idea right now, so maybe you can find a way to believe yours. Figure out how it's true. But you know it's true already, right? You just don't know how to explain it philosophically.

BRIAN: Do you know it's true?

YOU: No, but you do.

You become aware that Julia and the docent are talking. Soon after, a new group of tourists enters the Temple, and you three walk outside, returning to the heat and the sunlight.

JULIA: While you two were talking, I found out that they give philosophy lectures here at the Temple every Wednesday night. Brian, maybe you can meet some philosophers there to talk about your ideas.

BRIAN: Wow. I would go, except for the traffic.

JULIA: Yeah, maybe you can make a day of it. Isn't there something else downtown? You don't have a job, so you could find a place to hang out downtown and then go to the lecture. And Beth can bring her laptop with her and work downtown too.

BRIAN: I don't know... a lot of philosophy lectures aren't for me... a lot of philosophers aren't for me...

JULIA: Okay, maybe it'll work out and maybe it won't.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's a good way to look at it.

YOU: Anything else to see while we're here?

BRIAN: All we did was go to a restaurant and a store and the Temple.

JULIA: Is there somewhere we can take a nap? I could use one before

driving all the way back to where we live.

You go over to the map and try to guess if any of the buildings have places to sleep. The plaza is all paved, no grass or trees, no soft ground or shade.

BRIAN: No, it looks like we have to go back home as is.

YOU: Wait, I think there's a park somewhere downtown.

You get out your phone and check.

YOU: Yeah, it's not too far away.

So you go over to the park and find some shade under a tree. You don't feel sleepy, for some reason, so you stand watch as Julia and Brian lie down, trusting absolutely every person in the universe to not kill them for thirty minutes. You see them awake for a bit -- Brian probably never goes all the way under, but soon enough, Julia is breathing heavily and regularly. You look on her like she's your own child, and feel peace inside yourself.

Some young adults are playing soccer over on the other end of the park, and crows are up to something.

Then the thirty minutes are up and Julia's phone goes off. She wakes up and Brian wakes up (or not) and they dust themselves off.

JULIA: Hm, got some grass stains on my pants.

YOU: Is that a problem?

JULIA: No, I have more pants. And, I bet the stains will come out. If not, I have pants for wearing when I take naps in the park. Okay, let's go back to the car.

You find your way back to the pay lot. No one has vandalized Julia's car. You get in and she drives. Soon enough it is you who are drowsing and sleeping while Julia plays her music and she and Brian talk over it. In this way, you skip experiencing some of Hoheres Wesen's famous traffic, and are unaware of the ideas, memories, and hopes which form the relationship which continues between Brian and Julia.

You faintly hear Julia say loud and clearly to Brian,

JULIA: Since I'm taking a different freeway home, I'll drop you off second.

BRIAN: Okay.

As you drowse and doze, you enter and leave a reverie.
"Somewhere, somehow, there's a real life for me." echoes in your mind. You think of your parents and think of calling them on the phone. Why should you call them on the phone? Was it seeing Julia asleep as your child which makes you a child who needs to call your parents? Or is there something else? A little beth inside you who wants to speak to your mother and father? This beth knows more than you do sometimes. Reality. Being real. Thinking. Knowing. Relating. Caring. Trusting. Philosophy. You look out the window and see a car drive past you though it's in the lane to the right of you. The traffic flows the way it flows. You drowse. You doze. Julia gets off the freeway. Down the murder mile. Down the carnage boulevard. Past the terror train. Past anxiety and deadness and bluntedness. Past the dirt and the dust. Hellscape Wonderland smiling down from three story buildings. The bus. Things looking familiar. The grocery store. The liquor store. Mitzi's. The laundromat. Your apartment.

JULIA: Wake up, Beth, you're home.

YOU: I've been awake.

JULIA: Really wake up.

YOU: Thanks for the ride.

You gather your things and leave.

JULIA: We should hang out again sometime.

YOU: Sure thing. Maybe someday we'll run into each other purely by chance.

JULIA: No coincidences when the Universe is afoot.

BRIAN: Simone Weil preferred to call "Providence" "Chance".

JULIA: God-believers have so much baggage they have to say stuff like that. But the Universe has a clean record.

BRIAN: Does it?

...he says as you open your apartment door, having walked away from the curb.

BRIAN and JULIA (more or less simultaneously, distantly): Goodbye.

You wave and enter your apartment, shut the door and lock it, and feel simultaneously worn out and refreshed.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 14 "Alte Stadt"

Written 11 April 2019

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COMMENTS

(no comments)

Episode 15 - "catholic tastes"

You sit in Julia's car, once again in traffic. Brian is not with you. You two are going to "an appetizer bar" to meet him and two of his friends from out of town.

JULIA: What is this place called again?

YOU: "Catholic Tastes"

JULIA: What's that all about?

YOU: I think "catholic tastes" means broad or universal.

JULIA: Okay, so they're going to have appetizers from all over the world?

YOU: I guess so.

JULIA: Huh.

Traffic is being its usual self. Then you get off the freeway and travel down some main streets, find the establishment, find parking, get out of the car and lock the doors, walk, and approach.

The building's sign stylizes the name as "catholic tastes". The sign is lit up in this early night-time.

You two enter.

The room is dim, but lit with a certain pale yellow warmth by tasteful fixtures. The room is on the small side, long, organized around the bar. The bar is covered in tile. There is a row of small tables in a line parallel to the bar. The walls are covered in brickwork.

JULIA: What is that painting?

YOU: I think that's the Virgin of Guadalupe.

JULIA: And that stained glass looks like Jesus.

There's a stained glass piece lit up from a light on the wall, set behind the bar. It appears to be of Jesus turning water into wine.

JULIA: Huh, it looks like this place might be Catholic-themed.

YOU: Yeah.

A man walks out, behind the bar.

MAN: Hello, what can I get for you?

YOU: We're waiting to meet some friends here.

MAN: Alright, so anything to drink?

Something tells you to order water.

YOU: I'd like some water.

MAN: Mineral water?

YOU: Yes.

MAN: With ice?

YOU: Okay, sure.

MAN: How about you?

JULIA: I'll have the same.

You two sit down at the bar and soon the man returns with

your drinks.

YOU (truthfully): This is a beautiful place.

MAN: Thank you.

YOU: Are you the owner?

He looked like an owner.

MAN: I'm the co-owner. The other owner is in the back getting the appetizers ready. I'm the bartender and he's the food guy.

JULIA: Is this place Catholic-themed?

MAN: We thought we would play around with that a little, yeah.

JULIA: Did that offend anyone?

MAN: When we first opened, we got a strongly-worded email from the diocese. But it's all good. These things happen. One of our best customers is a priest.

Julia makes a face that you detect but he doesn't.

You all make some small talk and then he disappears into the back to talk to the other owner.

JULIA: When are the other people coming?

You check your phone.

YOU: It looks like they're finding parking.

JULIA: Okay.

You look at the line of beers and wines behind the bar, and idly look through the beverage menu.

Julia looks down at the grout on the bar.

JULIA: This place is really tasteful.

YOU: Yeah, the painting is really good, the decor. Oh, it looks like Brian.

BRIAN: Hello.

His companions, a woman and a man about his age, sit down at the bar.

BRIAN: This is Andrew and his wife Felicity. Andrew was my roommate in college. This is Julia, and Beth.

YOU: Hi.

FELICITY: Hi.

ANDREW: Hello.

JULIA: Hi.

You make small talk and the other customers come in, filling the tables and the rest of the bar. Soon the restaurant is noisy, and you and Julia are isolated from Brian and his friends, as they are so concerned with catching up.

Bartender approaches with menus.

BARTENDER: I'll be back in a bit to take your orders.

You all study your menus.

The menu is broken into three different sections. There's the Feast-day menu, all meat-based. There's the Lenten menu, all fish-based. And the St. Francis menu, which is vegan. It looks like everything comes as a half-dumpling, made either with regular wheat, or gluten-free.

JULIA: There's one here called "St. Peter's Basilica" -- "basil, pepper, almonds, dried cranberries".

YOU: Yeah, they're all like that.

JULIA: This is a luxury place.

YOU: Each one is only two dollars.

JULIA: I bet they're not very big.

YOU: Well, can we afford it?

JULIA: Yeah, we can afford it. This isn't a big deal.

YOU: Yeah, I can afford it, too.

You see on the next page some non-appetizer items. They have "Monk's Bread" which apparently is plain, dry bread. "Brushed with oil and vinegar" says the menu. Also there are some sauces, including the provocatively-named "Judas' Tears" which is "a salty quinine sauce, for those with truly

catholic tastes".

Then you see at the bottom of the page the specials. Chief among them is "the Rosary". "All 59 of our appetizers, arranged on a platter, served with a crucifix."

You count to make sure, and sure enough, there are exactly 59 of the appetizers.

Andrew and Felicity are immediately taken with the idea of the Rosary.

ANDREW (to the bartender): Do you think the five of us would be able to finish a Rosary?

BARTENDER: Absolutely. It's the perfect size. Maybe order some Monk's Bread, too.

ANDREW: Okay. You guys want it?

It looks expensive but you don't say anything. You divide the price by five and it still seems like a lot. You still don't say anything.

ANDREW: My treat.

He's so confident in this offer that none of you think to refuse it. And the way he's dressed, and the way he talks, and the things you overheard from his conversation with Brian earlier make you think that for him, this is nothing, just a night out.

Andrew orders a St. Agnes Stout.

BARTENDER: Excellent choice.

ANDREW: That's brewed by monks, right?

BARTENDER: That's right.

Felicity orders a drink as well. Brian even orders a drink (one of their "Virgin Margaritas").

The bartender looks at your bill.

BARTENDER: You guys are in luck. You qualify for a tithe.

BRIAN: What's that?

BARTENDER: Ten percent of your bill goes to St. Therese's Kids, a Catholic charity for children with cancer.

ANDREW: How did we qualify?

BARTENDER: When your bill exceeds a certain amount, you earn the right to give...

ANDREW: Wow, I wish I had spent even more.

BARTENDER: There's always next time...

ANDREW: I'm from out of town.

BARTENDER: Well, you can always donate to St. Therese's Kids online.

ANDREW: Yeah, I guess that's true.

The night proceeds. Andrew, Felicity, and even Brian speak loudly, get into their reminiscences. Felicity and Andrew even have a friendly argument over whether they want to have kids.

You and Julia are in your own world, taking in everything you see and commenting on the people around you.

The platter arrives.

BARTENDER: I'm going to count them once so you don't have to.

He counts each appetizer confidently and convincingly. There are exactly 59 of them.

Then he goes back and comes back with a crucifix, placing it in a hollow spot in the crowd of appetizers.

BARTENDER: Enjoy.

You find yourself for some reason only interested in the vegan appetizers, which you can identify because the tops of the appetizers are missing, showing their contents. Julia follows suit, and eats less than you do. The others are impressed by what they eat, and enjoy what they have with all their hearts.

YOU: These are really good.

JULIA: Yeah. I agree.

Overall, this is turning into a good night, surrounded by beauty. You and Julia relax.

YOU: Look at the Virgin painting. Doesn't she look sad?

JULIA: Yeah, but why should she be sad? She's so beautiful.

YOU: Sadness is beautiful.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: Do you ever wish you could live inside a painting?

JULIA: Which painting?

YOU: Any painting. A painting you like.

JULIA: Yes. At least for a day or two.

The evening goes along and you talk about Robert, and Julia's dates, and also about your work. You and Julia are catching up. This bar is the right kind of place to catch up.

At some point, the bartender puts on some background music. It seems odd to you that there wasn't any earlier. It's an opera. You don't normally listen to opera, but somehow in the context of all the trust, and all the appetizers, and the mineral water which must have been turned into wine inside of you, the music is indescribably beautiful to you, and you look on the crucifix, now all that remains of the Rosary, with new eyes.

YOU: Julia, look at the crucifix. It's so beautiful.

JULIA: Yeah, there is something about it.

YOU: I can't say anything bad about this place.

JULIA: I can't either.

You two are caught up in the flow.

The three others talk and talk, and you and Julia fall silent, checking your phones. And then the bill comes and Andrew pays, for everything. You all leave, Brian now going with you two since the others are headed their own way.

ON THE WAY HOME

Traffic is only a little lighter this time of night. Brian sits in the passenger seat, and you sit in the back seat. Julia looks over her shoulder when she makes a lane change and taps her fingers on the steering wheel when she has to wait for the car in front of her to move forward.

BRIAN: I realize you two didn't get to hear much of what my friends were saying. So it's like you didn't really meet them.

YOU: We heard bits and pieces. You went to college with Andrew?

BRIAN: Yeah. At the University of Hoheres Wesen.

JULIA: What were you like in college?

BRIAN: I was normal.

JULIA: Like you're normal now?

BRIAN: Yeah. I've always been normal.

JULIA: You've never been weird?

BRIAN: No. I think other people think I'm weird.

JULIA: But they're wrong.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: How are you normal if everyone else is different from you?

BRIAN: I'm like the normal distribution. Most people aren't.

YOU: Like you're average?

BRIAN: I'm like averageness. Average people aren't like averageness.

YOU: Does it make you uncomfortable to talk about yourself?

BRIAN: No. Why would it?

YOU: Are you being egotistical when you talk about yourself?

BRIAN: No.

YOU: Okay. I believe you.

BRIAN: Yeah, I didn't do any clubs in college or anything. I just studied and read in the library. And, yeah, I hung out in the apartment with Andrew.

JULIA: Did you have any other roommates?

BRIAN: Yeah, but nobody I kept in touch with. Just people we had for a

year to fill out the lease.

JULIA: Would you describe Andrew as one of your best friends?

BRIAN: No.

JULIA: Was he at the time?

BRIAN: I think we were close just from spending so much time together, but I don't know if we were really friends. Or maybe we were friends, from spending so much time together, but we weren't really close.

YOU: What's he been up to these days?

BRIAN: Well, he got married to Felicity, for one. That was a couple of years ago. He works in a law firm, a lot of hours. They live on the East Coast now.

JULIA: New York?

BRIAN: Yeah. They live in New Jersey and he works in New York.

JULIA: What does she do for a living?

BRIAN: She's a hairdresser. She wants to have a baby and quit working and raise the baby full-time.

YOU: That would be great. She should totally do that.

JULIA: Beth, would you want to live that life?

YOU: I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I would.

BRIAN: Maybe you would make a good mom.

YOU: Yeah, maybe.

JULIA: Is that something you want?

YOU: Sometimes I think that it is, but then I don't.

JULIA: Maybe you shouldn't be a mom.

BRIAN: Maybe if she became a mom, she would be committed to her child so much that she would be a good mom even if she didn't feel like it that day.

JULIA: Yeah, maybe.

BRIAN: Change of subject: what was your favorite appetizer?

YOU: I didn't recognize any of them by name except for St. Peter's Basilica.

BRIAN: How was that?

YOU: It tasted like basil salad.

JULIA: That's pretty much what it was from the menu.

BRIAN: How about you, Julia, what was your favorite?

JULIA: I didn't have a favorite. They were all good.

BRIAN: My favorite was the Paschal Lamb. We tried to identify all of them, looking at a menu.

You continue to talk, in the same vein.

BRIAN: Catholic Tastes was pretty good. I'd go there again.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: Are we going to remember it though?

YOU: We'll probably forget about it.

BRIAN: It is a long ways away, in traffic.

JULIA: So we're not going to go there very often.

YOU: We might forget it if we don't go there very often.

BRIAN: But maybe it will come up and we'll go back there.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: I kind of want to make my own appetizers now.

YOU: You should.

BRIAN: Yeah, I'm totally going to do that when I get home.

JULIA: Maybe you will, maybe you won't.

BRIAN: I will. I'm an appetizer person now. I've been converted.

JULIA: You didn't like appetizers before?

BRIAN: Not really. I like my meals to be filling, for a good price.

YOU: Have you heard of Simple Life?

BRIAN: What's that?

YOU: It's a fast food chain.

BRIAN: I don't normally go to fast food places.

YOU: Their slogan is "Faster than fast food, and healthier, too."

BRIAN: How do they manage that?

YOU: They're mainly a rice and beans place. They constantly make rice and beans and just put them in containers when people drive up.

BRIAN: It's a drive through?

YOU: Yeah. And they have a small sit-down space. They also make greens and other vegetables.

BRIAN: No meat?

YOU: No.

BRIAN: How much do they cost?

YOU: Same price as fast food but bigger portions.

BRIAN: Do they have sauces?

YOU: Yeah, they make salsas and sauces.

BRIAN: And they make money?

YOU: They've been expanding.

BRIAN: Huh, I'll have to check that out.

YOU: Definitely.

BRIAN: It sounds filling.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: Is the sit-down space like a fast food place?

YOU: Yeah, not very inviting.

BRIAN: You've been to one?

YOU: I went once, yeah.

BRIAN: How was the food?

YOU: I got black beans and brown rice. And, some kind of greens, probably collard.

BRIAN: How was it?

YOU: It was just like if you make black beans and rice at home, with collard greens. It's not like restaurant food at all.

BRIAN: Wow.

YOU: Yeah, it was pretty plain so I put some salsa on it and then it was good. Also vinegar on the collard greens.

BRIAN: We should go there sometime.

YOU: They don't have any locations near our part of town.

JULIA: Maybe we'll remember if we're ever out where they are.

BRIAN: A chain like that probably has a story behind it.

YOU: Yeah, probably. I don't know what the story is, though.

You all lapse into silence. Time passes.

BRIAN: Any plans for tomorrow?

YOU: Just working. I have a backlog.

BRIAN: How do you keep track of what it is you're supposed to do?

YOU: I put it on my calendar on the computer and that seems to work okay for me.

JULIA: I have to work at a restaurant.

BRIAN: Which one?

JULIA: It's way out in Dulce Verde. You don't want to go there.

BRIAN: No, I don't.

JULIA: I'll be working late. No fun.

BRIAN: No fun at all?

JULIA: Brian, have you ever worked an honest day in your life?

BRIAN: Not really.

JULIA: You don't understand. Factually, there are fun moments at my job, at any job. But the personal reality of the job is that there's no fun. No fun at all.

BRIAN: It's more accurate for you to say "no fun", even though there is fun.

JULIA: Right. There's a reality which you need to know about, and that is that this job is no fun.

BRIAN: So you probably want to go to bed.

JULIA: Yeah. But it was good to go out.

BRIAN: Yeah, Catholic Tastes was different.

JULIA: It felt like being in a Nativity Scene.

BRIAN: Because of the stained glass scene of Jesus?

JULIA: No, just the way the different things made the vibe.

BRIAN: You grew up Christian?

JULIA: No, my parents weren't really into it.

BRIAN: Did you ever think about it?

JULIA: I had a boyfriend in high school who took me to church. But that was enough for me.

BRIAN: Are you against Christianity?

JULIA: Are you against lies?

BRIAN: I try to be.

JULIA: At this point I don't try to be against Christianity. I heard something once that said that if you attack something, you make it bigger.

BRIAN: So you're attacking Christianity by ignoring it?

JULIA: Yeah.

BRIAN: So your action is to ignore it, but your heart is to attack it.

JULIA: No, my heart doesn't care.

BRIAN: No, but deeper, your heart is to attack it.

JULIA: Yeah, I guess so.

BRIAN: What don't you like about Christianity?

JULIA: It's a bunch of bad advice. Like the Sermon on the Mount.

BRIAN: I don't know that the Bible is true, but the Sermon on the Mount is beautiful.

JULIA: No, it just keeps people from getting the good things they can get.

BRIAN: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will see God."

JULIA: Yeah, out of wish fulfillment.

BRIAN: Wait, I got that wrong. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

JULIA: Yeah, same thing.

BRIAN: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

JULIA: Yeah, if somebody next to them does the comforting. In which case, duh. That's what people do for each other when they care about each other. You don't need Jesus to tell you that.

BRIAN: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

JULIA: That's a straight up lie.

BRIAN: There's the quote "The meek will inherit the earth, but the bold will inherit the stars."

JULIA: No, neither of them get anything. The earth is inherited by the power structure.

BRIAN: Maybe the power structure is meek.

JULIA: That sounds like Christianity. Christians do their meek things and live off the fat of the land.

You are taking in this conversation and don't feel like adding to it.

BRIAN: But Christians aren't all in power.

JULIA: That's true.

BRIAN: I'm not saying I'm a Christian, but I guess I'm saying that the reason why I'm not a Christian is more that I just can't be sure that the Bible is true.

JULIA: Nothing in the Bible offends you?

BRIAN: I would expect a real God to have some features that could offend me or other people. I just don't know that the God of the Bible is the real God.

JULIA: You don't always seem to have the most empathy.

BRIAN: Why is empathy such a good thing?

JULIA: You'll never understand.

BRIAN: Is it something that's good in itself?

JULIA: You'll never understand.

BRIAN: Am I defective?

JULIA: I don't want to talk about it.

BRIAN: Okay.

There is silence, and then Julia gets off the freeway.

YOU: I've never read the Bible.

BRIAN: You didn't grow up religious?

YOU: No. My parents just wanted us to be good kids. And I've been a good kid all my life.

BRIAN: It was probably your genes. The kind of parents who want good kids tend to have good genes.

YOU: Absolutely. I can't take any credit for how I've turned out.

BRIAN: Do you want to read the Bible? I've been thinking about reading it all the way through and it would be easier if I had someone else to do it with.

YOU: I'm not super-interested, but I guess I'm a little interested.

BRIAN: Okay, maybe later if you're more interested. I remember one time when I was in college, I was playing one of Andrew's console games...

YOU: What was the name of the game?

BRIAN: I don't remember anymore, but it was one of those RPGs with a plot.

YOU: Okay, I played those when I was a kid. Like Final Fantasy?

BRIAN: Like Final Fantasy. Basically.

YOU: Okay, got it.

BRIAN: I was really into it for a while. Maybe I was halfway in, and there had already been one plot twist. Now, this game has a feature where two players can play at once. But only one of them really controls the game. And one of my other roommates wanted to play along with me, like to make it a social thing. And I said yes, because of course I said yes. And he played as the player who controlled the game. I only did things during fights, when I controlled the one player in the party that was assigned to my controller.

YOU: Was that a problem?

BRIAN: I didn't feel too bad, just went along with it. But then he stopped wanting to play the game. I would ask him if he wanted to play and he said, "not now", but then later he would and we would play. And the times we played were spaced further and further apart until he completely lost interest. And by then it was finals and I graduated and moved out, and I never finished the game.

YOU: So you don't want it to be like that with the Bible.

BRIAN: Yeah. If you get more interested later, and can put in the time, we can do that, but I don't want to be bound to someone who stops me from doing what I need to do.

YOU: You need to read the Bible?

BRIAN: Yeah. At some point.

YOU: How do you know that you need to do that?

BRIAN: I just know.

YOU: Huh. Usually I try to figure out why I have intuitions.

BRIAN: It's more important to obey your intuitions than to understand them. If you know you have to do something, you know it.

YOU: I guess that's how morality works.

BRIAN: Right, exactly.

YOU: Sometimes if you come up with an explanation for something you feel, it doesn't seem valid anymore. But I don't find that that's the case with morality.

BRIAN: Morality is just something we evolved to have.

YOU: I know. We evolved it so that we can not die.

BRIAN: Why is dying bad?

YOU: If we didn't think it was bad, we wouldn't exist. Therefore it's bad.

BRIAN: That doesn't follow logically.

YOU: But it's an emotionally satisfying explanation because we're wired to survive.

BRIAN: Maybe I need to read the Bible because God wants me to think about it.

YOU: I guess the God explanation is as good as the "we survive because we do" one as far as grounding the validity of an intuition. But how do you know that God exists? Oh, right, I remember your explanation.

BRIAN: How does it go, in your memory?

YOU: God exists because there's no way external reality can mean anything to us otherwise?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: It's a really technical point. People don't believe technical things these days.

BRIAN: So you don't believe it?

YOU: I don't think that means it's invalid, but it's just not what my brain was evolved to believe. Or something like that.

BRIAN: Evolution can explain anything.

YOU: Pretty much. If it's adaptive, it's natural selection, and if it's not, natural selection hasn't caught up with it.

BRIAN: Pretty good idea, there.

YOU: Amazing idea.

JULIA: Okay, philosophers. Here we are at Brian's place.

Brian gets out and says goodbye and goes inside.

JULIA: Okay, Beth, time to go to your place.

You're quiet along the way to your apartment. Julia lets you off and you wave goodbye and go inside.

You are pretty tired yourself and go to bed as directly as you can, doing what you need to do along the way.

As you sleep, you have a dream.

You are in a forest, walking along a path, when Julia appears. She's looking for Brian.

YOU: What happened to Brian?

JULIA: Brian is dead.

Next you and Julia are sitting in Julia's car and Brian appears.

BRIAN: You exist.

JULIA: You exist, too.

BRIAN: I see you.

JULIA: I see you too. I need to look at the road.

Brian reaches his hand out and puts it on her shoulder.

JULIA: We'll talk about this later.

You wake up, figuring out that Brian is not dead and has not touched Julia's shoulder in the process.

And then you go through your waking-up routine and mostly forget the dream. You entirely forget the dream, because it

has nothing to do with your waking life.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 15 "catholic tastes"

Written 13 April 2019

Released 13 April 2023

COMMENTS

1. The owners of the appetizer bar are doing a little on their own, but they represent a reality that's much bigger than them.
2. This is not about Catholicism or high church Christianity in particular, but it is about Christianity.
3. I'm sure a trait could be found in some animal that counted against the truth of evolution (something natural selection should have removed by now), but otherwise, evolution is a powerful and general way to explain things.

ACT V

Episode 16 - "Inner Conflict"

You're having one of those days where you wonder if you should be doing what you're doing. Maybe you should do something more altruistic with your life. You think about what that woman Angela does. Everybody loves people like Angela.

Your career -- you don't think of it as a career -- your ongoing job, is fine. Every job has its upsides and its downsides. You know that if you picked a job at random to do, it would be worse than this job. Any job would be worse at first, but once you got used to it, just about any other job would be worse than this one is now, even though you're tired of it. But you can imagine that working with young people, to teach them how to write, would be better.

You decide to see how your dilemma fares when put out in the open, in the light of conversation, so you text Brian and Julia and discover that they're both at

MITZI's CAFE, 1731 WASHINGTON AVE., HOHERES WESEN, CA, USA

You head over.

Mitzi's is organic tonight, round and quiet, but not in a subtle way. You order your drink and then find where Brian and Julia are sitting.

BRIAN: Hey Beth, you said you had something to talk about.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: What is it?

YOU: Remember that woman Angela I told you guys about?

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: I'm trying to decide whether I should go work for her. But it's not just about that.

JULIA: If it was you would have already done it, or forgotten about it.

YOU: Yeah. I don't know what this is really about.

BRIAN: Before you came, there was this guy talking to us.

JULIA: It was weird.

YOU: I missed it.

BRIAN: Yeah. But what he was talking about was related to what you're talking about. He was talking about how his life philosophy was to do what was convenient.

YOU: Should I just do what's convenient?

BRIAN: No one would fault you for it. Doing what's inconvenient is the exception. That's what he would say, at least.

YOU: Huh. Kind of like that saying "Just like you don't believe in every god except one, I don't believe in one more god, your god."

BRIAN: Yeah. I hadn't made the connection.

YOU: So you're telling me I should just go for it, if I feel like it? For no good reason?

BRIAN: Yeah, if you're being really consistent, you'll realize that there's no good reason to do anything altruistic given the many selfish things you do.

YOU: So what was this guy's story? Did he say?

BRIAN: Yeah, he said that when he was young, he was really into doing the best thing possible. He was really principled. He wanted everything to be logically consistent. At first he tried donating to different charities that people recommended to him, and he volunteered. Then he discovered the effective altruism movement, and realized that it made more sense to donate to effective charities. He stopped volunteering because he got more busy at his job, making money to give away. And he stopped giving money to all the charities except the most effective. He found that giving money was psychologically simple, something he could do as his mind got more and more worn down by maturity and working at his job. He could just make a payment once a year, or set up a monthly automatic payment. And then all he had to do was earn money.

YOU: But then he stopped being that way.

BRIAN: Yeah. He didn't really understand what was happening at the time, but basically, he says he was understanding what reality is all about. The realization happened to come after he got married and had kids, but he said that he wouldn't necessarily assume it was because of that. He said he realized that reality doesn't work by people obeying their principles. They

just do what human beings do. Everybody gives them a pass because we're all human beings.

YOU: You mean, we're all people who fit in to our society? Human nature can change depending on the culture.

BRIAN: Exactly. He felt like it was, not immoral, but too much effort to go against culture. You just end up making people feel bad and nothing good really does happen.

YOU: Because we all genuinely want good things to happen, it's just really hard.

BRIAN: Right. We're not bad people. If we thought we were bad, we'd just feel bad and still not do anything good. So there's no point in making people feel bad by telling them they're bad people.

YOU: But sometimes people do tell each other that they're bad.

BRIAN: He brought that up. He was saying that one thing that got him into effective altruism was the Drowning Child Illustration, the one where you realize that it's more virtuous to let a child drown in front of you if by doing so you can save the lives of ten children that you can't see. And while you don't see a drowning child in front of you every day, the ten kids really do exist, and there's something you can do about their situation. And when he heard that, it hit him hard. It made him do inconvenient things for years. But then he thought about it, and he realized that the logic of the Drowning Child Illustration implied that almost everyone in America is okay with people starving to death, or dying of malaria. Basically that we're all murderers. But nobody in the effective altruist movement took it that way. He certainly didn't. There was something about it that was an absolute, that spoke to him, but then convenience set in.

YOU: But we couldn't possibly believe that we're murderers, that would be psychologically unsustainable.

BRIAN: Right, so everyone in the movement who was inspired by that Illustration were inspired by something they never would have let inspire them if they understood it. And it was effective in motivating them to change their lives. But in his case, he just returned to the mainstream after a few years. He says he likes to travel with his family, see new places. "Life is made for enjoyment", he says.

YOU: Did he say that sadly?

BRIAN: No, but not happily either.

YOU: So is he a good person or not?

BRIAN: I don't know.

JULIA: Maybe it would have worked if the effective altruists had said, "Hey, we're all giving money to these charities, it's fun and cool, you should do it, too, this is what fun and cool people like us do." After they had made friends with each other.

BRIAN: Yeah, maybe that would work. But what they actually choose to do is to say "You need to take responsibility for the world. Look at reality for yourself. See the ugly truth? See your path for redemption? It's up to you to do what's real."

JULIA: It seems like being into reality just makes people suffer.

BRIAN: So, Beth, Julia and I were debating this before you came. Is reality worth it? Being a real person? Seeing things for yourself? Or is it better to not suffer?

YOU: Did you take the side of reality and Julia took the side of not suffering?

BRIAN: No, we found ourselves going back and forth. It was a weird debate. We took each other's positions, but we continued to disagree.

YOU: More debates should be like that.

JULIA: It's good that we never agreed with each other.

YOU: Agreeing is good, though, right?

JULIA: It's bad to agree too soon.

YOU: You're friends, still, right?

JULIA: No, we're enemies now. But that's better than being friends. The chart goes like this:

She draws on a napkin.

JULIA: "Really... bad... enemies... fake.... friends.... friends.... enemies...."
Yeah.

There's a progression from left to right.

JULIA: Really bad enemies are the worst. Then fake friends are the next worse. Then friends are better. But enemies are the best.

YOU: Why is that?

JULIA: Enemies tell you the truth. Really bad enemies scam you, fake friends con you, friends are too polite, but enemies tell you the truth.

YOU: But are all enemies like that?

JULIA: Sometimes fake friends pretend to be enemies so that they can be better than friends, and they use some enemy lines. But they aren't really enemies because they're still pretending to be friends.

YOU: So you and Brian have progressed to the next level?

JULIA: Yeah.

Brian nods.

YOU: Wow, I'm not sure I could ever be anyone's enemy.

BRIAN: I didn't either until just now. I can probably only be enemies with certain people.

YOU: Maybe when I find the right person, I can be enemies with them. Would that make me a real person?

JULIA: The first rule of becoming a real person is that trying to become real makes you fake.

BRIAN: Fakest thing ever.

YOU: Are you two agreeing on that?

BRIAN: Yes.

YOU: So you're friends again?

BRIAN: Right now I believe that trying to become real is fake because it's all about you, while there are suffering people out there you could be helping. If you just help those people, then you're not focused on yourself, and you are real. You can only be real when you're not thinking about whether you're real.

JULIA: And right now I believe that trying to become real is fake because when we want something to be real, what we really want is meaning, something from the Universe to speak to us most deeply within our beings. And you can never put words in someone else's mouth, and still have it be a communication of who or what they really are.

YOU: With all this talk of meaning and reality, aren't we forgetting about suffering? What kind of people are we, if we reach for anything other than the basics of what helps people not to suffer?

JULIA: People who care about reality really do something about suffering. People who stop caring about reality gradually do less and less. Brian was explaining about hell to me. I'm not convinced there really is a hell, but he made hell sound like it wasn't totally evil. Brian?

She mimes that she's speaking into and then passing him a

microphone. He accepts.

BRIAN: Thanks, Julia. Yes, well, there was this one study about hell, where they found that people who believed in hell engaged in less antisocial behavior. And people who believed in heaven engaged in more antisocial behavior. It's just one study, so I'm taking it with a grain of salt for now. But it makes sense to me when I think about it. If you believe in divine punishment -- whether it's hell or something else -- you have to do the right thing whether or not other people are looking. So then you start to internalize "don't cheat" as an absolute. "Don't cheat" becomes a little god that rules over you. And eventually you start to love "Don't cheat" because you come to understand how it's good for everyone. You love not cheating in itself, and it's a principle for you that you obey, even when people aren't watching, but not as a little god of pure morality, but a god of love for other people through the absolute divinity of that god. And not divinity in a warm, fuzzy way, but divinity in the sense that you have to fear and respect that thing. And I guess God takes up that little god of love into himself, so that through the little god we connect to the real person of God, who uses the doctrine of hell for our benefit. So that is why a loving God would threaten punishment, so that we would become real.

YOU: Couldn't God just tell us that we need to love and then we would know to do it?

BRIAN: You have to teach people who don't love people genuinely to love people somehow. You can't put the conclusion to your argument in one of the premises.

YOU: But come on, it's easy, just love people. Don't make it all complicated.

BRIAN: In that case, you're saying "people will disapprove of you if you don't abide by their norm".

YOU: Right. So then you internalize "an asshole looks like this; don't be an asshole" and then you hate yourself when you're an asshole and people call you an asshole and that makes you a good person, and then you aren't an asshole. You genuinely want to fit in with the people around you, they are your god, and that makes you into a good person. Being a good person is defined by pleasing the community as a whole. The community knows what kind of behaviors need to be stigmatized.

BRIAN: Does the community stigmatize us for not doing anything about the millions of people living in poverty?

YOU: No.

JULIA: Not even in the effective altruism community.

BRIAN: Does the community care about God's interests? Does it care about the environment? Is it motivating us to do anything real to prepare for the Calamity?

YOU: No. Not really.

BRIAN: So if you rely on this god as your god, you'll be stuck with the priorities of your community, rather than being connected with reality itself. Maybe the community will see reality, because people outside the community will teach it what to care about, from reality itself.

YOU: But the community absolutely hates and fights those people at first.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: I guess if you want to cheat in a socially acceptable way, that's fine socially, but it could have bad effects in the long run if everyone did it.

BRIAN: Yeah, you would have a gradual lowering of standards in society.

YOU: And the dark side of the belief in hell, all the guilt and shame of it, the way it gets people to cut off part of themselves, would still be there if the community was the punishing god. So the community isn't that much better.

BRIAN: But it's more popular.

YOU: Right now, it is.

JULIA: When people make each other's social approval into a god, then they have to be polite, and they start to become fake friends, and they never get to become enemies like me and Brian.

YOU: Yeah. The worst betrayals come from fake friends.

JULIA: Have you ever heard of Brian's Hierarchy of Betrayal?

YOU: Is this an official thing?

BRIAN: No, it's not. Have you ever heard of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs?

YOU: That's the one where there's a pyramid, and the bottom layers are about satisfying needs for food and sex and temperature regulation and stuff like that, and then the next layer up is social needs, and at the very pinnacle of the pyramid is self-actualization, whatever that is.

BRIAN: Okay, yeah. So some people threaten you at the lower levels of Maslow's Hierarchy, and then they don't become your friends at all. If you think of that threatening man you see on the street and steer clear of, he might stab you on a bad day, and you have to go to the hospital. But he's never going to betray you on the level of social stuff. For that you need a friend. You trust a friend, a nice person of your social class, you let them

in to the higher places on the hierarchy, and then they can betray you there. They can ostracize you, or slander you. But then, if you really trust someone, if there's someone that's really good at being your friend, or almost is a really good match, then they can betray you at the layer of self-actualization or even higher. Really advanced fake friends can actually make you betray what's really good, when you deeply and sincerely believed it. I bet it was one of them, or something like them, that got the effective altruism guy to the point where he would say "Life is about enjoyment" in the context of him going on vacation instead of helping people with malaria or poverty.

YOU: Maybe it was his wife.

BRIAN: It could have been. He didn't say enough for us to know. Maybe it was all of his friends who didn't even intend that, it's just out there in the culture, a spirit.

YOU: A spirit of friendship.

BRIAN: No one's feelings get hurt.

JULIA: But it really *hurts* when people's feelings get hurt. It matters.

BRIAN: Yeah, it's fake to not consider the reality of people's emotions.

JULIA: Sometimes you have to hurt people, but you *know* what it's like to be them, but you have to do it anyway.

BRIAN: Sometimes I wish I was as empathetic as you, Julia.

JULIA: You're funny, Brian.

YOU: I think someone could be fake by saying "I *know* what it's like to be you" and do something painful but not really care.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: So how can we deal with this?

BRIAN: I think some people are always going to be fake.

YOU: What if they believed in divine punishment?

BRIAN: That would help with some people.

YOU: But the mainstream doesn't believe in a punishing God.

BRIAN: You're right, neither the secular nor the religious people believe in divine punishment.

YOU: When I was growing up, my friends who went to church would tell me about hell. Like it was a big thing.

BRIAN: Yeah, things have changed. I guess I have run into some Christians who still believe in hell.

YOU: Isn't the belief in hell a really abusive thing?

BRIAN: It can be.

YOU: So nothing is perfect.

BRIAN: No, but things can be better.

YOU: I think if you find a reality that deep down you consider perfect, that's fake. Like if you say that things are good enough, throw up your hands, that's fake.

BRIAN: Yeah, and if you think your method of seeking to make things better is the best, that's fake.

YOU: So you have to have a kind of dissatisfaction all the time.

BRIAN: But it's fake to say "I should just make sure I have to have dissatisfaction feelings".

YOU: Right. You have to really be dissatisfied. You have to really cry out and never get what you want. That's how you can be real. But there's a version of that that crushes people emotionally.

BRIAN: Right, you have to get over the fake dissatisfaction in that area. If the dissatisfaction kills you, it's fake.

JULIA: You two are agreeing a lot. Are you friends?

BRIAN: Maybe it's possible for there to be real friends. Real friends are just as good as enemies, because real friends are based in dissatisfaction just as much as enemies are. Really bad enemies are like fake friends.

YOU: How do you know if someone is a fake friend trying to be an enemy to make themselves look like a friend, versus an enemy?

JULIA: You know. Your body knows.

BRIAN: There's a clarity of thought to a confrontation with an enemy. But there's confusion when there's a fake friend faking like an enemy. Enemies are into clarity, fake friends acting like enemies are into confusion.

YOU: You both know something about this. Maybe that's why you're enemies.

BRIAN: It might be why we find enmity trustworthy.

You feel hungry, and realize you've been here a while, and realize that you came here over a duration of time, which had a beginning, and a reason to begin. What about your question

of whether to help the young people at Angela's non-profit?

YOU: So what should I do about helping Angela?

BRIAN: Do you really want to help? Or are you on the fence?

YOU: I guess I'm on the fence.

BRIAN: Then do you really want to help?

YOU: No.

BRIAN: Okay, then don't do it.

YOU: But... I do feel like helping.

BRIAN: If that feeling really does cause you to help, then it was real. If it doesn't, then it was fake.

YOU: That's what being on the fence is all about. Brian, what do you do to help people?

BRIAN: Nothing. Except work on my philosophy and share my ideas with people.

YOU: What do you do, Julia?

JULIA: I just try to survive.

YOU: So you don't help people?

JULIA: I have to show up to whatever job I have to do so that whoever has my life when I'm not there doesn't get fired. That helps them but I have to do it.

YOU: I guess that does help people.

JULIA: If you want to help people, do it.

YOU: I think about it, but it's hard to commit.

JULIA: Okay, then don't do it. Someday it will speak to you.

YOU: When?

JULIA: Maybe you have to open your heart.

YOU: I'm trying to. I just don't have any clarity in this situation.

JULIA: Okay, maybe you really are trying. Maybe the trying will lead to you acting.

YOU: Maybe there's something else I'm supposed to be doing. But... this doesn't make any sense. I'm talking like there's some God or Universe with

a plan for my life.

BRIAN: You could earn the most money you can, and spend as little as you can on yourself, and donate the difference to the most empirically-recommended charity.

YOU: No, that's not right, that doesn't speak to me.

BRIAN: Why does it have to speak to you? What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for God?

YOU: Yes, I think I am, in a way.

BRIAN: Well, is there a God?

YOU: I don't think we have any proof.

BRIAN: But you're waiting for him.

YOU: Yes.

You think, then speak again.

YOU: Maybe it doesn't have to speak to me. I can just do what doesn't speak to me. But then, what do we live for if not for the things that speak to us? What do we know if not what we see ourselves, with our own eyes?

BRIAN: Adulthood is about paradox, about how what doesn't feel like it would be good for you actually is good for you overall.

YOU: I know. I learned that lesson when I became an adult. You're just learning it.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's why it's fresh in my mind.

YOU: But it's fake.

BRIAN: How so? Doesn't it lead us to do what's most effective?

You feel ardent and they let you speak.

YOU: It leads to fakeness. Because when we discount what we see, we rely on the community's point of view as well as on some kind of artificial best practice. The community and the best practices can be better than our own point of view, but if we rely on them for long enough, we lose touch with reality. Our culture is far too adult, has gotten out of touch with reality, valorizes being out of touch with reality, valorizes not looking at what you really think as being true. We don't believe in "The One" anymore and so we don't really believe in marriage, in being in love. Instead, anyone will do. We don't believe in God, or in morals, only in the socially-constructed God, in community as a God, in social disapprobation. Our maturity is

fake, is all about losing touch with reality in the midst of good technique. Brian, you and I are equals.

BRIAN: We are?

YOU: We are.

JULIA: Maybe you need to find a younger person to talk to about these kinds of things, Beth. Brian is just one person.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: If you find that person, maybe just to be their friend is the thing you're supposed to do, instead of being a writing teacher.

YOU: Yeah, maybe.

You feel emotionally exhausted -- you can be easily emotionally exhausted. Sometimes you catch yourself before you make speeches, but sometimes you don't. You don't want to be part of this conversation anymore but can't think of a graceful exit and the three of you find yourselves not talking for part of a minute.

YOU: I don't know.

BRIAN: The conversation isn't over.

YOU: Yeah. That's a good way to look at it.

You get up to go.

YOU: I think I should go now.

BRIAN: Don't be happy.

YOU: Same to you.

You go outside and walk around and think about everything. You think about how all we know is experience and we all experience how life has meaning. You think about things. You think about Angela. You barely think of her as human, as she was on the day you met. Angela, the source of the opportunity. You walk past a homeless man sleeping on the sidewalk. You pass a bar, which smells like a dive bar. You keep going until you get home.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
Episode 16 "Inner Conflict"
Written 25 April 2019
Released 25 April 2023

COMMENTS

1. Effective altruism is a movement in our world as well. For many people it is somewhat as described above. But there is more than meets the eye...
- 2.

YOU: And the dark side of the belief in hell, all the guilt and shame of it, the way it gets people to cut off part of themselves, would still be there if the community was the punishing god. So the community isn't that much better.

Is it really true that "all" the guilt and shame and self-mutilation of hell is present when we make society the punishing god instead of the idea of hell or the God who ordains hell? Arguably, a social god is even more pernicious when it uses the idea of the God of hell, than if it relies on the "softer" methods of ostracization and shaming.

For some reason, in our society, we live as though reason is real. As though facts really do apply to everything -- including moral facts, which we can't really ground in objectivity, which are instead grounded in human judgment instead. Why are we in the habit of applying moral facts evenly? Well, we're not, hence our ability to give ourselves a pass for not caring about starving people, or future people, or God. But to the extent that we are, where does this come from? From self-interest? Maybe. We realize that being altruistic is in the long-term self-interest of the human species. But why not be the one person who defects, in a crowd of people who cooperate, and take advantage of all of them? Why care about the long-term interests of the human race?

It could be that belief in hell makes us believe that the moral world is a world of fact, that it's a law that always applies. The deepest self-interest is pierced through by the thought of excruciating suffering that never ends. So then the self-interested have to care about the hell-wielder's laws, until they get enough time to come to love the laws themselves and then the law-giver, and to love law for its legitimacy rather than for its force.

In a world where we still have law internalized in us, we come to think that the idea of hell, which taught us to care about what we personally did not care about, as fact and inescapable reality, by the very pathway of our own self-interest, is abhorrent. But could we have arrived where we are without the idea of hell, or of a punishing God, who watches us all the time and deserves to discipline us?

If we believe in a morality grounded in something outside human judgment, it is likely that it will be inhumane, because it will go against our judgments as the human consensus. If we believe in morality as being merely our consensus, then we are condemned to whatever our consensus happens to be. Whoever it excludes, will be excluded. What we tend to do is feel morality as law, as reality, but really we're just executing the social god's, the consensus's, desires.

Episode 17 - "Jitters"

You feel kind of nervous. Not shaking on the outside. Maybe on the inside. But not on the outside of the inside. You can't feel your physical guts. But there's nervousness in you.

You read somewhere that when people focus on things consciously, the influence of the thing they take in consciously works its way invisibly into their behaviors and attitudes and perceptions, subtly, subconsciously. Oh, that word "subconscious".

You aren't really having a bad day, or a good day. Just a day. But the nervousness is in you.

You get through all the editing you have to do for the day. It's easy and it's hard. Pretty soon you're getting hungry and you get up and make yourself some food. A quesadilla. With salsa on it. There's this one brand of salsa that comes in a glass jar you can get at the supermarket. It actually comes from Mexico, and that's the salsa you put on your quesadilla.

You decide to go to the cafe after that. What's life without a rut? Ruts aren't all bad.

You walk to...

MITZI'S CAFE

A homely place to you now. As you open the glass door, you can smell baked goods and coffee. Mostly coffee, but also

baked goods. You wonder if you will have to eat something before you leave this place. Your nervousness might want you to.

After you get your tea, you sit down at a table and pass some time looking out the window.

Julia enters and comes over to your table.

JULIA: Beth, I've been feeling some strange energies today.

YOU: Yeah, I've felt this faint... nervous feeling.

JULIA: Earlier today I had the jitters.

YOU: Do you think something is going to happen?

JULIA: I don't know, maybe. Yeah, *something* is going to happen.

YOU: Like an earthquake?

JULIA: I don't know.

YOU: But we should stay alert.

JULIA: Yeah.

Brian enters and stands in line. Julia gets up to go order, standing behind him. You are all close enough to hear each other. Someone is ahead of Brian in line and is taking her time ordering.

JULIA: Brian, how are you today?

BRIAN: I've been thinking about all kinds of weird things today.

JULIA: What kind of weird?

BRIAN: Well, there's my normal weird things, and then there's what I've been thinking about today.

JULIA: Beth and I have been feeling weird, too.

BRIAN: Interesting. I wonder if something's going to happen.

JULIA: Hopefully nothing bad.

BRIAN: Oh, now it's my turn.

Brian orders some herbal tea and a scone. Then Julia gets a coffee and a croissant. They make their way to your table.

JULIA: Brian had the right idea, ordering food.

YOU: When big things are afoot, it's good to have a full stomach.

BRIAN: Not too full.

JULIA: Don't worry, Mitzi's' baked goods will never make you too full.

The barista tonight, Alicia, hears but does not care.

YOU: So what do we do while we wait for something big to happen?

JULIA: I don't know. Maybe we can do what we normally do.

BRIAN: Talk.

JULIA: Be part of the Universe.

YOU: Anything new happen?

BRIAN: Before tonight, I was feeling pretty good, because I got somewhere good in my book project.

YOU: Anything you can talk about?

BRIAN: No, you'll just have to see when I'm finished.

YOU: Okay, that's fine.

JULIA: What's your book about? I forget if you told me.

BRIAN: Were you paying attention?

JULIA: Yes.

BRIAN: Are you paying attention now?

JULIA: Yes.

BRIAN: It's about listening to God. It's about how everything we experience is God's speech to us. Basically what I've already been talking to you guys about, on and off.

JULIA: But your book is going to be interesting?

BRIAN: Yes, I'm going to make it really interesting, in the way that I write it.

JULIA: When will it be done?

BRIAN: I don't know.

JULIA: Have you started it yet?

BRIAN: I've done a lot of thinking for it.

JULIA: So you've thought about starting it.

BRIAN: I've thought about starting it.

JULIA: Are you going to finish it?

BRIAN: Yes, I'm going to finish it.

JULIA: I believe you. I can see destiny in you.

BRIAN: What's that?

JULIA: It's like gravity in the Universe. The Universe is like a giant field or matrix of plot points, and stories flow from one place to another according to destiny, which is like gravity.

BRIAN: Is that all the Universe is?

JULIA: No, the Universe is everything put together. But it's just a flow of forces, the flow of narrative forces.

BRIAN: Are we stories? Or plot points?

JULIA: No, we're characters.

BRIAN: So the Universe is all the characters and plot points held together by destiny?

JULIA: Well, we're held together by something. But we travel by the power of destiny.

BRIAN: Why would my destiny be to write a book about God?

JULIA: People believe in God, and you're going to help them believe something different about him.

BRIAN: But it wouldn't be true.

JULIA: The Universe doesn't care. It just makes things happen.

BRIAN: Can you trust the Universe?

JULIA: The Universe shows you the way to go. It says "Here's the highway", and if you don't want to trip, go on the highway because it's paved.

BRIAN: Do you know where the highway goes?

JULIA: It goes where it goes. If you don't like it, get used to it. That's what you can do, is get used to it. That's what makes you a good person.

BRIAN: Where did the characters come from?

JULIA: I don't know.

BRIAN: If the Universe is all about plot points, that makes sense. I could see there being a bunch of NPCs, doing what the Universe wanted them to do.

YOU: "NPCs"?

BRIAN: "Non-Player Characters", like in a video game, some characters are played by the player or players, and some aren't.

YOU: Oh, like in Final Fantasy. The ones who have two lines of dialogue and walk back and forth.

BRIAN: Exactly. But NPCs could in theory be really sophisticated. They just don't have any consciousness, unlike player characters.

YOU: Which have my consciousness, if I'm playing them.

BRIAN: Exactly.

JULIA: Brian, pick up where you left off. You were saying something.

BRIAN: I was saying something about the Universe making sense if everyone was an NPC. But something about my own experience makes me feel like I'm alien to the Universe.

JULIA: Because you have free will?

BRIAN: Yes, that's one thing. But even if I didn't have free will... I care. *I* care.

YOU: You care on a personal level.

BRIAN: As me, Brian. I care as someone with my particular past and present, and presumably, with the future I'll have. I care as a full person. And that makes me alien to everything, if the Universe is all about narrative gravity.

JULIA: Are you an alien to everything?

BRIAN: I have been, in the past. But as I connect more with God, I see that all the events outside of me are spoken to me by God. God is what connects me to what's outside me in a deeply personal way.

JULIA: Are you telling us what's going to be in your book now?

BRIAN: You're right. That's all I'm going to say for now.

YOU: Brian, what if whatever it is we're nervous about kills us and we never got the chance to hear what you had to say?

You all laugh at your joke.

Julia gets a text.

JULIA: My uncle is in town.

BRIAN: Your uncle?

JULIA: Yeah... he wants to know if I want to come over and see him and my aunt.

YOU: Does he come into town often?

JULIA: No.

YOU: Well, you should go see him. Carefully.

BRIAN: The roads are dangerous on jittery nights.

JULIA: Oh wait, he says... my aunt is sick and just wants to rest... But she doesn't need him...

BRIAN: Do you think he would want to meet us?

JULIA: Hm... actually... I never thought about it but I bet you guys would like each other.

YOU: This is our chance, then.

JULIA: "Hey, if your interested come to mitzis cafe on washington. You can meet some friends of mine."

You wait and sip.

JULIA: Okay, he says, "Okay I'm on my way Julia good to see you again"

YOU: What's your uncle like?

JULIA: First of all, his name is Don. He's in his 60s. He's an uncle by marriage. He married my aunt, and they had two kids, my cousins. I used to hang out with my cousins a lot when I was a kid. All of this was before my curse started.

BRIAN: When was that, the curse, that is?

JULIA: When I stopped being a kid, when I was 17. It was a big surprise when it first happened but it only happened once. I thought I was just imagining things once I got back to normal. But then after a while I realized it was a real thing.

YOU: Did you tell your family about it?

JULIA: I kept it to myself until I was sure it was a real thing and then I told them. At first just my parents, but now everybody knows.

YOU: What else to know about your Uncle Don?

JULIA: He's the only one in the family who's a Christian. My grandparents took their kids to church on Christmas and Easter but that was it. A lot of us have gotten into spiritual things. But Uncle Don wasn't part of the family. He was an atheist when he married my aunt and then after a few years went through a conversion experience.

YOU: How do you feel about that?

JULIA: It was before I was born so I don't have any memories of how that went. But he's my favorite uncle.

YOU: Do you think his Christianity has anything to do with what kind of person he is?

JULIA: Maybe. I heard a quote one time which is that religions make people more of who they are. They're like amplifiers.

BRIAN: Maybe because religions help people have faith in themselves, disguised as faith in God?

JULIA: Yeah.

BRIAN: Do you know anything about what he was like before his conversion?

JULIA: Yeah, see here's the thing, Brian, he was into philosophy. So I know you two will have a lot to talk about.

BRIAN: Did he study it in school?

JULIA: I don't know. I know he was into it in college.

YOU: What do you like about him?

JULIA: Are you trying to figure him out from a distance?

YOU: You're right, I was trying to form expectations.

BRIAN: Expectations are the worst.

YOU: I know Brian, I'm trying to quit.

BRIAN: They just lead to disappointment.

YOU: Disappointment is okay if that's what you're going for.

BRIAN: But disappointment, by definition, is something that you're not going for.

YOU: You're right. Well, what else can we talk about while we wait for him?

BRIAN: Maybe we can go on another car trip in the city sometime.

JULIA: I can drive, if my legs are in good shape.

YOU: Where should we go?

BRIAN: You know the Fortress?

YOU: Is that that one gated community?

BRIAN: It's the original gated community, at least in the Wonderland.

YOU: It's got the statues?

BRIAN: Yeah, statues on the rooftops.

JULIA: Let's just talk about going in great detail but not actually go there. Brian, have you been there?

BRIAN: Yeah, a few years ago.

JULIA: Tell us what we will see.

BRIAN: The Fortress is located in what was once an intermittent stream bed cutting between the fifth and sixth of the Hell Hills. It was established in the 1920s by a group of very rich men who came to both establish business concerns in Hoheres Wesen and also relax in the ample sunshine of Southern California. They decided that they wanted to keep the common people out, but in a beautiful way, so they built great iron gates at each end of the canyon. There was one road through it, named Riverview Boulevard. By day, they let people through who looked like the kind of people they liked. By night, they shut the gates and only let people go in and out if they lived there.

JULIA: As we approach, what will the iron gates look like?

BRIAN: Nowadays, the main part of the gate, the part that could block traffic, has been removed, but the rest remains. It's ornate and very strong, with patterns of ivy crawling up it, but in a way that does not make it easy to climb. At the top, there are sharp points. Written in large letters, visible to us as we approach on Riverview Boulevard, is the motto of the community, "Attend To Your Own Business", a message embodying all that was most valued to the founders of the Fortress.

JULIA: Is "the Fortress" really the name of the neighborhood?

BRIAN: Not officially. The founders called it "Riverview Heights".

JULIA: Describe the heights.

BRIAN: Large houses and mansions are built set on the side of the canyon and the hills, cul-de-sacs snaking up to them and sometimes switching back.

JULIA: Describe the mansions.

BRIAN: They are mansions but they have cool statues on the top.

JULIA: Describe the statues.

BRIAN: The statues are made of bronze and depict an epic battle. It is as though they are fighting rooftop to rooftop, each statue on the rooftop of a mansion. Foot soldiers aim their arrows at each other. A man is wounded. Gods tower, goddesses strike dead, everyone is twisted, in motion. It is a masterpiece. We are impressed.

JULIA: Where do I park?

BRIAN: There is no place to park. All the parking is tightly regulated for residents' use only. You just have to drive around all the time.

JULIA: Wow, I'm imagining myself wishing we had only gone on a journey there in our imaginations.

BRIAN: There is some parking down in front of the touristy business district, but only while we shop.

JULIA: Describe the shops.

BRIAN: They are all touristy and all upscale. An upscale ice cream shop, an upscale clothing boutique, an upscale coffeeshop, an upscale jewelry store, an upscale bistro, an upscale restaurant.

JULIA: An upscale dry cleaner?

BRIAN: No, residents of Riverview Heights have to drive through the gates to do their dry cleaning. There just isn't room on Riverview Boulevard, which only stretches a mile from gate to gate.

JULIA: But Riverview Boulevard is a major street. It goes all the way down to the ocean and nearly goes up into the mountains, except that it's at the wrong angle.

BRIAN: But the portion within the gates is only a mile.

JULIA: I see. So all those places in the H.W. where there is no river to be seen, but the boulevard is Riverview Boulevard, that all connects to the group of very wealthy men who founded Riverview Heights in the 1920s?

BRIAN: Yes.

JULIA: Okay, so let's park and get some ice cream.

BRIAN: Okay. We each order ice cream.

JULIA: Do they have pistachio ice cream?

BRIAN: Definitely.

JULIA: Okay, I'm ordering that.

YOU: I'll get a scoop of chocolate and a scoop of vanilla.

BRIAN: What kind of chocolate?

YOU: What kinds do they have?

BRIAN: Dark chocolate, fudge, and chocolate milk.

YOU: Oh wow, chocolate milk?

BRIAN: It's a light chocolate.

YOU: Okay, well since I'm getting vanilla, I'll have dark chocolate.

BRIAN: What kind of vanilla?

YOU: What kind of vanilla?

BRIAN: Just kidding, there is only one kind of vanilla, very high quality vanilla with little bits of vanilla bean in it.

YOU: What will you be having?

BRIAN: Nothing.

YOU: Nothing?

JULIA: You came all the way out to Riverview Heights and you're not going to buy something?

BRIAN: Well... okay.... I'll get some seltzer water.

JULIA: So now what?

BRIAN: We sit out on the deck and watch the traffic go by as we enjoy our consumables. Then we leave.

JULIA: Where do we go next? We've barely done anything for all the driving I've done.

BRIAN: Okay, so we could go check out Los Ciudadanos.

JULIA: What's that?

BRIAN: Back in the 1920s, while Riverview Heights was being established, between another two of the Hell Hills, the second and third, a vibrant Mexican-American community was coming into being. But during the Great Depression, the land in between what had already been developed turned to slums, and the neighborhood never really got on its feet again until after World War II. In the 1960s, political sentiment built, and the residents of the neighborhood, named Los Ciudadanos, wanted to make a statement in counterpoint to Riverview Heights. So they built concrete

pillars in people's backyards, and made concrete statues of their own battle scene, a mythical scene, symbolizing ongoing struggles, with eagle, snake, and other Meso-American symbolic animals.

JULIA: Okay, that sounds like an interesting place to go. Do they have taco shops?

BRIAN: Los Ciudadanos is a regular H.W. neighborhood and flows out seamlessly into the sprawl on either end of the canyon. It's nothing fancy, nothing nice, nothing blighted.

JULIA: So it has taco shops?

BRIAN: More than one.

JULIA: So then we get tacos. Describe the tacos.

Brian thinks and is about to say when in walks a man whom Julia recognizes as her uncle Don.

JULIA: Hey Uncle Don!

DON: Hey Julia! Good to see you!

He walks over to the table.

DON: These must be your friends!

BRIAN: We are. I'm Brian.

YOU: I'm Beth.

DON: Beth, what a lovely name! Brian is a good name too. It means "warrior", doesn't it?

BRIAN: A lot of names mean "warrior" if you go back far enough.

DON: Absolutely. The world is a place for war. Listen, I need to get something to drink. What do you recommend here?

YOU: Can you have caffeine?

DON: Probably shouldn't, not this late at night.

BRIAN: The herbal teas are all good.

DON: The herbal teas are good? Alright, maybe I'll have one of those.

He goes to order, and while he's at the front of the line gets to talking to Alicia.

JULIA: That's Uncle Don, always getting into conversations.

After a while, Don returns with his drink. It's iced.

DON: Alicia said I might try their switchel.

JULIA: That must be new.

DON: You may not have noticed it, it's written on a little sign next to the register.

YOU: What's in switchel?

DON: It's basically vinegar water, with a little salt, she said. It's a way people got hydrated back in the old days.

BRIAN: Interesting, I'll have to try that sometime.

Don takes a sip.

DON: You know, this is alright. Mine has two kinds of vinegar in it, malt and cider. I'll have to try and make this when I'm back at home.

Everyone sips.

DON: So, Julia. Tell me about your friends. Or your friends can speak for themselves if they want.

JULIA: Brian, you first.

BRIAN: I'm a writer. I'm interested in philosophy.

DON: Would you say that you are a philosopher?

BRIAN: I feel weird saying that.

DON: It's a line to cross, to go from being a student of philosophy to being a philosopher.

BRIAN: I see a lot of college professors calling themselves philosophers.

DON: Are you that kind of philosopher?

BRIAN: No, I'm not a college professor type of philosopher.

DON: So you're a gadfly, like Socrates? Or like Diogenes the Cynic?

BRIAN: No, not really. I'm a nice guy.

DON: Okay, good. A nice guy. Looking for beauty more than truth?

BRIAN: I consider that a trick question.

DON: You're right. Beauty and truth are always the same thing. But they aren't always good for you.

BRIAN: But they're worth dying for.

DON: No thing is worth dying for, and there's only one person worth dying for, who shall remain unmentioned.

BRIAN: Yeah.

DON: I can tell that you and I will have a lot to say to each other. But I want to see what Beth has to say about herself.

YOU: I'm an editor and a writer.

DON: What kind of things do you write about?

YOU: I mostly just write short stories to pass the time, get the energy out of me.

DON: You have a lot of energy?

YOU: I do.

DON: But you're a calm person.

YOU: Yes.

DON: Have you ever considered publishing your short stories?

YOU: When I was younger I did. I thought I was becoming an editor just to pay the bills for my writing career. But then at some point I got to where I would just write the stories but never have the whatever it took to look at them again or edit them. So they just sit on my hard drive.

DON: But you're not really disappointed with your life.

YOU: No, it is what it is.

DON: Maybe someday you'll show the stories to an editor.

YOU: Maybe.

DON: Maybe not. We'll see. You'll see. I might not know.

YOU: Well, if I remember, I can tell Julia to tell you.

DON: Yes, that would be very nice.

YOU: What kind of work do you do?

DON: I'm a businessman these days. When I was younger I tried being a pastor, but then I got convicted about all the time I was spending asking people for money, so I got into the vending machine business. I cut back a lot as a pastor, but we were able to send money to missions overseas. So that was a good thing. But then I got to where, like you with your writing, I was just a Christian in the moment, and I couldn't come back to it

professionally, couldn't edit it or look at it.

YOU: That sounds like a natural faith.

DON: You know, you're right, it's a good faith for a vending machine guy. But for a pastor, you have to take on a heavier burden. Bigger temptations there. You ever read *The Lord of the Rings*?

YOU: Oh yeah.

DON: That guy Tom Bombadil is unaffected by the Ring, so he can't wear it, because it's just not for him. He'd lose it. That's how I am with the ministry, with Christianity.

YOU: So pastors have to face corruption and evil?

DON: Absolutely. They're fighting the status quo. If you're fighting Satan, you get pushback. He has us programmed so that we sin when we try hard to do things. That's what keeps the status quo together. We can try hard to do things that don't change the status quo, and not sin in an obvious way, but something's always waiting to get you when you try to change the way things are, like magic.

YOU: I can see that. Something would, or else things would be different.

DON: Exactly. With your permission, I'll talk some more to Brian, is that alright? Oh, Julia, you don't mind if I focus on your friends?

JULIA: No, Uncle Don, this is fine. We'll have another chance to talk.

DON: Okay, glad to hear it. So Brian, I want to share a little bit about when I was younger.

BRIAN: Okay.

DON: When I was in college, I got into philosophy in a big way. Back then I was an atheist, and what I wanted was a way to explain how the world worked. I liked math and science when I was in high school, like the proofs in geometry class and learning about how atoms worked in chemistry class and all of that. All of that good stuff. But in the back of my mind I always wondered about how consciousness worked in with atoms. How could there be both matter and consciousness? You probably have some good ideas about that, but first hear my whole story.

BRIAN: Sure.

DON: Well, I found out that the place to go to to ask questions about matter and consciousness was the subject of metaphysics. I found out that there is so much more to metaphysics than just that question. I tried to learn what I could from the books I could find in the library. I read Plato and Aristotle all the way up to the existentialists. At first I read about

them. You ever read Copleston?

BRIAN: Yeah, I have some of his books.

DON: Well, I got into them and read a lot of the primary sources. But I wanted to know what was going on in philosophy in modern times, and it seemed to me, from what I could see, that people had given up on the search to really explain metaphysics. None of the older philosophers had ever figured it out and there was nothing any of the contemporary philosophers were saying that really said anything. So there were a lot of theories, but nobody really *knew* the answer to metaphysics. So from that I got into epistemology and ethics and all that stuff. Not just reading the history of philosophy but really grappling with it myself. I would have rather understood metaphysics and ontology, but the other stuff was more popular and it seemed to get results. But then I realized that ethics was just a form of pressure, like people pressuring each other, and that in epistemology, nobody could really figure out if anyone knew anything, same as how nobody knew anything about metaphysics. Nobody knew anything but everyone was really interested in philosophy, and they said really interesting things. It was so strange to me though... reality is all around us, here, there, right in front of your face, you can drink reality and talk, but when you think about it critically, you find you can't say anything and you can't know anything? Very strange. Ultimate reality is so accessible but so far away. But it's really just right here, is what I thought.

BRIAN: Yeah, that sounds like things I've thought.

DON: Wonderful. So I got into politics. Whatever fire in me wanted to get into philosophy, wanted to get into politics. The political drive was somehow the same as the philosophical drive, I guess a craving for a connection with reality. So I got into leftist stuff, but as I got older I found myself talking a lot with my roommate, who was more of a liberal. So we talked about all the different ways leftism was better than liberalism, and liberalism was better than leftism. But we agreed that leftism and liberalism were both about human well-being. And I got into marches and he got into policy until we were both worn out. And back then we both had a streak of being kind of nihilistic. We were nihilists and we were into things that mattered at the same time. And gradually, over time, the leftism I was into and the liberalism he was into got to us. And we slowly became more and more against all the control and anxiety in politics. So we half-seriously and half-not started to believe in what we called "passivism".

BRIAN: That sounds interesting.

DON: We said that people were divided between egoism and humanism. Both of them are about well-being. But we remembered this quote, or thought we remembered it, from Nietzsche, that goes like this: "Only a sick

society cares about well-being." So passivism is where you don't do anything to seek well-being. And we took that pretty far. It even affected my school performance and early career. I did things out of any reason -- fate, duty, social obligation, caprice -- but I tried not to do things to seek well-being.

BRIAN: So if you don't focus on well-being, there's chance and law to motivate you. You would like laws exactly when there was a gap between them and the way things would be done in an ideal world or simulation.

DON: Exactly. So I got tired of fate, duty, social obligation, caprice, all that, and one day I asked myself once more "If you don't focus on well-being, what is there?" And the answer I felt inside me was "Keep your heart true." So I thought about it, and it made sense to me, so I went for it. So now I had married my wife, and I was trying to figure out how to keep my heart true. And I was also still trying to figure out metaphysics and epistemology. Somehow there has to be a way that reality holds together. But I never figured it out. I lost my drive and interest in philosophy at around the same time that my first kid was born, who is a few years older than Julia here. And I was working real hard in my head all the time, and then giving up. And I had a kind of breakdown, always trying to keep my heart true, true to whatever principles I had. That's how I interpreted all that. Like I was doing all the altruistic, humanistic, egoistic things I had to as part of life, but I was doing it to be true to my heart. I was getting into a kind of legalism that way. I ended up being really true to myself, but then I kind of fell apart, and then through all of that I started attending a church. And I felt the Holy Spirit, and it just shut off all my interest in philosophy. But it or I should say he was real. But then over the years I've been thinking. Maybe there is something to philosophy. I think my mind just got shut down so I could get through everything. So anyway I went to seminary and became a pastor, and did some good work until I became a vending machine salesman and maintainer. And I raised some kids with my wife and God, and here I am. That's my story.

BRIAN: Okay, thank you. I don't always get to hear stories from older people.

DON: From your parents?

BRIAN: They've both died.

DON: You're young, late 20s, early 30s?

BRIAN: Late 20s.

DON: So young.

BRIAN: They died in a car crash.

DON: That's hard. You're missing out, but you'll find your way.

BRIAN: Yeah, it was hard for a while, but then I just kept going. Every day you keep going and that becomes your reality.

DON: But you never forget?

BRIAN: No, I never forget.

DON: But it's not bitter.

BRIAN: No, it's not bitter.

DON: No regrets?

BRIAN: No.

DON: Okay. Any other relatives?

BRIAN: Not so close.

DON: Okay. No church?

BRIAN: I'm not a Christian.

DON: No? But you believe in God?

BRIAN: Yes.

DON: Okay. Ah... no church for you. Okay. Well, what do you think, Brian? What are you thinking after all that?

BRIAN: I think there's something good about passivism. It's good not to be too much into well-being.

DON: Yeah, I think so.

BRIAN: But it must be hard. And how can you avoid well-being? It's like you have to serve it. It has to be your idol or you die.

DON: After I became a Christian I struggled with this and I struggled with it a long, long time. Several times I heard the answer right under my nose but it wasn't the right time for my eyes to be opened. Several times people would read the verse about "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's". You know what I'm talking about?

BRIAN: Yeah, I read the Bible.

DON: Excellent. "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's"? Then render to health what is health's. Render to well-being what is well-being's. But don't give those wily idols what is God's. Your heart is for God. And there will be times where you have to choose, well-being, or God, to really have shown to yourself where your heart lies. But normally you pay your taxes. And you can get through life that way, but not get dragged down into life by life.

JULIA: Brian, this is like that hierarchy you were talking about.

DON: A hierarchy? Like Maslow's Hierarchy?

JULIA: Brian has his own hierarchy. Tell him about your hierarchy, Brian.

BRIAN: Okay... it's a variation on Maslow's Hierarchy. People betray you at the lower levels so you don't even let them in to the higher levels. Only people who are trustworthy in all the lower levels can betray you in the highest level, which I guess is self-actualization. But I don't know, I don't really like that as the highest.

DON: What I would do with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is add to it. It's pretty good in itself. But at the very bottom, you need God. And you always get God, so you don't realize you need God. God is always, always, always sustaining the world. And then at the very top of the pyramid, above everything, you need God, just God, nothing else.

JULIA: Because God loves you?

DON: God acts in the pyramid. He gives food and love. But above the very top of the pyramid, is just God for his own sake. And you don't always get God, but you keep looking and you find God. You can know that you need God, just God, but a lot of times the other needs get in the way. So maybe you have to satisfy all of your needs to figure out you need God. But some people have a direct path to that need. They are known as the "blessed".

BRIAN: Don't some people get all their needs and not feel the need for God?

DON: Maybe, yes, unfortunately. I don't know if I've met anyone like that but I bet I have.

JULIA: If they're perfectly happy with their lives, wouldn't God be happy that they're happy?

DON: I don't know the answer to that, but I know that when we're happy, it doesn't always work together with all the other happinesses.

BRIAN: I think I might know that answer.

DON: Don't tell me yet, I'm not ready to know. You'll tell me with something you're not sure of and I won't be ready to hear it.

BRIAN: Okay, I'll put it in my book.

DON: Send me a copy when you're done.

BRIAN: Will you have time to read it?

DON: I don't know, but sacrifice anyway.

BRIAN: Okay, that's not too much of a sacrifice.

DON: A few dollars and a lot of hours.

BRIAN: I have to put in the time anyway.

DON: Okay, well, look, my drink is long gone. You all have eaten your pastries and finished your drinks. Is there anything you want to hear?

YOU: Any embarrassing stories about Julia?

And Uncle Don obliges. Julia is embarrassed but enjoys the attention.

DON: Okay, well that's about all. I need to get back with my wife. Hello from her, Julia.

JULIA: I give you my hello to transmit to her. Hope she gets better.

DON: I think she will, this time. Okay, better get this old body on its feet...

He stands up, says good-bye, and walks out the door.

YOU: How are your jitters, Julia?

JULIA: I feel better, but they're not all gone. How is your nervousness?

YOU: Still there.

BRIAN: My mind is still processing, don't know if the weird thoughts have come back.

YOU: Okay, well, what would your uncle have said about all that?

JULIA: He would say, "pay attention".

YOU: I guess that makes sense.

BRIAN: I'm tired.

YOU: Yeah, me too.

JULIA: Tired and wired.

YOU: We're probably not good for each other right now.

BRIAN: We should part for our own good.

JULIA: Okay, then.

She stands. The rest of you follow suit, and go your separate ways, into the night.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 17 "Jitters"

Written 2 May 2019

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COMMENTS

1. I am not 100% sure, but I think the person who said religions were like amplifiers is Katy Brand. If it was her, I heard her say it on a podcast where she was paired with a Christian comedian to discuss Christianity (I'm pretty sure that podcast would have been *Unbelievable?*).

Episode 18 - "Complaint"

You get off the floor at the conclusion of your stretches and then change into your outdoor clothes. You've been trying stretching as a way to relax and work on your flexibility. You breathe deeply, in through the nose and out through the mouth for 5 minutes. You are ready for anything.

But what is there to be ready for? Probably just going to...

MITZI's CAFE

A laidback vibe and the smell of coffee come out of the door and you walk inside. You know that there is something for you in this cafe. You know this every time, and you are always right. You order your green tea and sit down at a table by yourself.

You get bored after a few minutes of waiting for your tea to cool. You think of taking a sip to see if it can be drunk now, but decide that instead of burning your tongue, you should try something else to occupy you while it cools. So you look through the stack of weekly readers and find one with the crossword puzzle not filled in, and you set yourself to filling it in, sitting there.

You keep waiting and eventually try sipping your tea, and it burns your tongue a bit still, so you wait and fill in the

crossword. And then in comes a young man, looks like he's in his early twenties, and after he orders, he sits down at a table near yours, with his black tea. He too gets bored and gets up and looks through the stack of weekly readers and finds one with the crossword puzzle and sets himself to fill it in.

YOUNG MAN: I'm stealing your idea.

YOU: Okay, that's fine.

You are both silent for a bit until he asks for a clue.

YOU: You're going to have to figure that out on your own.

YOUNG MAN: Oh, okay. That's fine.

He tries several words and erases his pencil marks to write better words. Then he gives up.

YOUNG MAN: That's enough of that.

YOU: You're giving up?

YOUNG MAN: I don't know, it's fine. It doesn't matter if I finish a crossword puzzle or not.

YOU: It's good practice to finish what you start.

YOUNG MAN: Why is that? Oh, I get it, that way you get in the habit of finishing things and then when there's something hard, you'll finish it.

YOU: Yeah, and you become more responsible for what you're doing.

YOUNG MAN: I've never been responsible for anything.

YOU: Are you in college?

YOUNG MAN: Yeah, I'm a junior at UHW.

YOU: So you've worked on projects before.

YOUNG MAN: Yeah, I guess I was responsible for those. But I wasn't deeply responsible. I just got them done.

YOU: Are you kind of a lightweight person?

YOUNG MAN: Huh, I never thought about that. Maybe. Are you a responsible person?

YOU: In a way I am and in a way I'm not. I pay my bills, but I'm not any more responsible than that, really.

YOUNG MAN: You don't have any kids?

YOU: No.

YOUNG MAN: No husband?

YOU: No.

YOUNG MAN: You don't take care of your parents?

YOU: No.

YOUNG MAN: Huh. I guess you're like me. I wish I was responsible.

YOU: Well, you can always choose to be responsible.

YOUNG MAN: No, I'll never choose that. But I wish someone would *make* me be responsible. Force me to live in the world.

YOU: There are a lot of people who would be mad at you for saying that.

YOUNG MAN: They have too much responsibility?

YOU: Some of them would be mad at you for having too much freedom. Other people would be mad at you for wanting to throw away your freedom.

YOUNG MAN: Okay, here's a weird question. Are you a woman?

YOU: You mean... biologically?

YOUNG MAN: Well, it's easy for me to call you a woman because you're so much older than me. But I find it really hard to call female adults my age "women". Very strange. I can call them "girls" easily. Is it that we're not really adults? When do people become adults? These are some questions I ask. So you, are you a woman?

YOU: I think I am a woman, but I don't consider myself to be a woman.

YOUNG MAN: What do you call yourself, then? A girl?

YOU: It's strange... it's like I don't have any name for myself. I'm just a person.

YOUNG MAN: Yeah. Well, yeah, you are a person. You have to be that. Everyone is. But there's a difference between a male and a female person, and between a child or an adult.

YOU: In between child and adult, there's adolescent.

YOUNG MAN: Right. So I can call myself by the adolescent category of "guy". But girls/women don't have that. I guess the name for an adolescent woman is "girl".

YOU: Yeah.

YOUNG MAN: How old are you?

YOU: 42.

YOUNG MAN: And are you still an adolescent?

YOU: Yeah. And no.

YOUNG MAN: In the old days, a guy could go to sea or go to war, and become a man that way. But nowadays a lot of guys don't get that chance.

YOU: You could become a father.

YOUNG MAN: But I'm not ready. But when will I ever be ready?

YOU: When your adolescence runs its course, I guess. Society isn't going to do anything to attack your adolescence. It'll just linger until you're 40 or 50 years old.

YOUNG MAN: What's it like being a 42 year old adolescent female human?

YOU: Mellow. Tired. Distant from reality. Not everyone in my position is like that though.

YOUNG MAN: You're very mature.

YOU: Thank you. But I'm still an adolescent.

YOUNG MAN: You ever think about becoming a mother?

YOU: Sometimes, but there's no reason to make that decision.

YOUNG MAN: You like your freedom too much?

YOU: No, I don't like my freedom all that much. I don't dislike it. But to become a mother is a big decision.

YOUNG MAN: Well, you don't want to do it alone.

YOU: No, definitely not.

YOUNG MAN: I guess you're getting to the age where you don't have as much time left to have kids.

YOU: You're right.

YOUNG MAN: Does that bother you?

YOU: No, not that much.

YOUNG MAN: Maybe you shouldn't become a mother.

YOU: Yeah, probably not.

YOUNG MAN: But then you'll be an adolescent for the rest of your life.

YOU: Yeah, I guess it's too late to go to sea or go to war.

YOUNG MAN: What's the point of having kids? Is it to become a real person?

YOU: I think it can be.

YOUNG MAN: So it's a selfish act.

YOU: Selflessness often is deeply selfish.

YOUNG MAN: But in a good way.

YOU: Maybe sometimes it's actually a good thing.

YOUNG MAN: Would you bear a child in order to become a woman?

YOU: I do want to be a woman someday. Maybe when I'm tired and old enough, I'll be a woman.

YOUNG MAN: But if you had had a kid when you were nineteen, you would have become a woman then.

YOU: Probably. Well, maybe by the age of 25 I would have. At least in our culture. Have you heard of neoteny?

YOUNG MAN: No, what's that?

YOU: It's how a species prolongs childhood, usually to get some advantage. Human beings spend 18 years raising their kids to sexual maturity, well, maybe it really only takes 14 years. But a lot of animals become sexually mature within a year of birth. We invest a lot in those years, to make really well-prepared parents.

YOUNG MAN: So it's like our parents are exquisite works of art, shaped by time, when they start their families in their mid 30s?

YOU: Yeah. I guess that's the idea. People take a long time to settle on one particular self or life. And until they do, they can't commit to any one person as a mate strongly enough to take care of kids over the long term.

YOUNG MAN: We're just trying to figure ourselves out.

YOU: And this is the part of the conversation where I say, "Yeah, but take your time, you have a long time ahead of you". That's what I feel like saying. It wells up in me.

YOUNG MAN: But you're not really going to say it?

YOU: No, because it occurs to me, rationally though not emotionally, that that might not be true. Maybe we don't have a lot of time ahead of us.

YOUNG MAN: And if I could really believe that, maybe then I'd be a man.

YOU: Yeah. I think we try to get the most out of the pleasure palace of youth. Freedom, pleasure, friendship. Life is short but then you die.

YOUNG MAN: Remember your god in the days of your youth, but the god is a fulfilled life rather than a God of your whole life.

YOU: Are you religious?

YOUNG MAN: I'm a Christian.

YOU: Are you sure?

YOUNG MAN: What do you mean?

YOU: There are two ways to be a Christian: to have Christian beliefs or to fit into a Christian community.

YOUNG MAN: I do both. I go to church and have Christian beliefs.

YOU: Do you really fit in at church?

YOUNG MAN: Well... no.

YOU: Then maybe you're not a Christian.

YOUNG MAN: According to the people at church I am a Christian.

YOU: Officially. But unofficially, are you?

YOUNG MAN: I don't know, I'll have to think about that.

YOU: If God exists and is Christian, he might think you're a Christian.

YOUNG MAN: But part of being a Christian is being part of the Church.

YOU: Yeah, that's beyond me to figure out.

YOUNG MAN: Are you religious?

YOU: No, not really.

YOUNG MAN: Why did you ask if I was religious?

YOU: You remind me of someone I know who is religious.

YOUNG MAN: Is this person a Christian?

YOU: No, not really.

YOUNG MAN: But they believe in God?

YOU: Yeah. And he talks about the Bible enough that I caught your reference to "Remembering your Creator in the days of your youth".

YOUNG MAN: It seems like you want more than the god of a fulfilled life.

YOU: I do.

YOUNG MAN: But why? If you're an atheist... are you an atheist?

YOU: Yes.

YOUNG MAN: Then why do you care about anything other than feeling fulfilled in this life? Is it that you don't care about fulfillment itself?

YOU: I don't know, maybe. I guess something out there speaks to me.

YOUNG MAN: But not God?

YOU: I don't know. Why would you think it was God and not just a voice? Just Meaning itself?

YOUNG MAN: If someone says something to you, they have to be an English speaker. Unless you speak another language?

YOU: I just speak English.

YOUNG MAN: Okay, so people can make whatever noises they want with their mouths, but to talk *to you*, they have to speak English?

YOU: That's basically true.

YOUNG MAN: So who is it that can really speak to your heart on a deep level?

YOU: Usually just people who are both real people and have gotten to know me.

YOUNG MAN: So whatever it is that speaks to your heart is probably a person who is really real and has gotten to know you, or already knew you?

YOU: That makes sense as an argument.

YOUNG MAN: But you don't believe it? Aw, come on, what could persuade you?

YOU: I don't think an argument could persuade me. It would have to be God himself.

YOUNG MAN: How do you know that wasn't God speaking through me?

YOU: I don't know. But I'll know when God is speaking to me, if he exists.

YOUNG MAN: How will you know?

YOU: The person who's meant to receive a message knows what it means.

YOUNG MAN: So you'll just know.

YOU: Right.

YOUNG MAN: Okay. Well... uh... back to the earlier topic about what to call people.

YOU: Yeah.

YOUNG MAN: What is the point of having kids, to just perpetuate the meaningless cycle of people?

YOU: Are you really concerned with this?

YOUNG MAN: Yeah, I am.

YOU: That's one of the things that makes me think you're not really a Christian.

YOUNG MAN: Well, what is the point of having kids?

YOU: People seeking reality, like you said.

YOUNG MAN: Is there any reality other than continuing the human race?

YOU: Well, it keeps life going.

YOUNG MAN: But do you believe that? You don't want to have kids.

YOU: Yeah, I think there might be something more to life than having kids. Having kids is a way to seek reality, but seeking to achieve your own reality is one of the fakest things you can do.

YOUNG MAN: So you just have to wait until God does something to speak into your life.

YOU: Yeah, something outside of you has to speak on a very deep level, and you are not at all in control of that. All you can do is wait.

YOUNG MAN: I think you are a Christian. Officially you're not a Christian, but under the surface you are.

YOU: Hm, I never thought about that before.

YOUNG MAN: Think about it.

You like this young man's frankness. A pause.

YOU: I would call you a "young man".

YOUNG MAN: And I like that label. I wish I could call myself a young man.

YOU: You could if it was socially acceptable.

YOUNG MAN: Yeah. You can call me a "young man" because you're twenty

years older than me. Someone who was ten years older than me might get away with it. But I can't do it. It's like I was trying to be older than myself.

YOU: I guess in "young man" there is implicit "man who is significantly younger than me".

YOUNG MAN: Yeah. But that's just the way things are.

YOU: Maybe that could change.

YOUNG MAN: I don't know if this is my hill to die on.

YOU: You should die on as many hills as you possibly can.

YOUNG MAN: That's your life advice? Do you live that way?

YOU: I'm too old for that.

YOUNG MAN: But you think that's good advice for someone else to live out? I guess it is kind of Christian. Take up your cross...

YOU: Maybe it's like you're going to one cross that's made up of multiple sub-crosses.

YOUNG MAN: And once you're on your way to one cross, might as well add another.

YOU: It's like going on a trip. Might as well go to three or four destinations if you're going to go that whole way out to the other side of the country.

YOUNG MAN: Why do you think dying on hills is a good thing if you're not a Christian?

YOU: You seem like the kind of person who would pick hills to die on that will often align with my interests.

YOUNG MAN: You trust my judgment?

YOU: Not completely.

YOUNG MAN: But enough.

YOU: Enough, I guess.

YOUNG MAN: What's your name? I'm Mason.

YOU: I'm Beth.

MASON: So do you come to this cafe a lot?

YOU: Oh yeah, all the time.

MASON: This is my first time here.

YOU: You come to cafes to study?

MASON: No, I just felt something telling me to come here tonight.

YOU: The Holy Spirit?

MASON: Yeah, probably.

YOU: You have to know these things for sure and then act like you don't know if it's God or not. Those are the rules.

MASON: Okay, thanks for telling me. It's like you want me to be a Christian.

YOU: I like being helpful when the opportunity arises.

MASON: Were you ever a Christian when you were younger?

YOU: No, but I've been around Christians a lot.

MASON: And people who aren't Christians but believe in God?

YOU: Yeah.

MASON: You're an observer.

YOU: When I was younger I wanted to be a professional writer.

MASON: That's cool. So you were the kind of person who takes notes on other people.

YOU: Yeah.

MASON: But is different than other people so that you can write about them.

YOU: Yeah.

MASON: What do you do for a living now?

YOU: I'm an editor.

MASON: You edit books?

YOU: Sometimes. Proofreading, copy-editing.

MASON: Is that a good job?

YOU: It's fine.

MASON: Where do you work?

YOU: I'm a freelancer.

MASON: So you work for yourself?

YOU: Right.

MASON: That's so cool.

YOU: What are you studying at UHW?

MASON: Software engineering. A basic way to make money.

YOU: Do you enjoy it?

MASON: Yeah, it's fun to program.

YOU: Is it your deepest passion?

MASON: No. I'm still trying to figure out my deepest passion.

YOU: How old are you?

MASON: 21.

YOU: You'd better get on that right away. It's not Jesus Christ?

MASON: Well, yes, it is, but what does Jesus want me to do? That's the question.

YOU: Better get on that.

MASON: I think I have to wait for God.

YOU: So in the meantime, what do you do?

MASON: Write programs, make money, hang out.

YOU: That could be the rest of your life on earth. Are you okay with that?

MASON: I don't know, I'll have to think about that.

YOU: Are you dating anyone?

MASON: Yeah! We've been dating for a year.

YOU: Is she okay with you writing programs?

MASON: Yeah. And with hanging out and making money.

YOU: Is her deepest passion Jesus Christ? Or whatever it is that your deepest passion turns out to be? Is she okay with you having a deeper passion or a call or hills to die on?

MASON: I don't know.

YOU: Okay. Think about it. Pay attention.

MASON: Do you have a boyfriend?

YOU: No, I'm single.

MASON: What's that like?

YOU: Everything has its ups and downs.

MASON: So you're not happy being single?

YOU: Okay, I've been saving up this analogy for a while. Do you watch movies?

MASON: Do you?

YOU: Not very often. But I used to watch movies. A lot of romantic comedies. And a lot of other movies have love plots. And it's easy to depict a love story. People kiss or make love or whatever. Or they flirt. It's easy to spot and easy to signal.

MASON: Okay, yeah.

YOU: But someone explained to me once that it's really hard to depict celibacy.

MASON: Couldn't you show a monk living his daily life, or living out a story?

YOU: Let's say the monk's story and daily life are all about loving God...

MASON: Yeah.

YOU: Well, would the movie be about celibacy or would it be about love of God?

MASON: Oh, I see. So you can't talk about your singleness.

YOU: Not really.

MASON: So what is it that you live for?

YOU: I don't know.

MASON: If someone looked at your life, what would they think?

YOU: I think they would think I liked being in my own world and hanging out with my friends here at the cafe.

MASON: And even though you don't believe God exists, you're waiting for God?

YOU: Yeah.

MASON: I guess maybe that fits your external life, like someone watching a movie could figure that out.

YOU: Yeah, I guess so.

MASON: Are you looking for a boyfriend or husband?

YOU: No, not right now. But sometimes I think about it.

MASON: But you don't act on it.

YOU: No, I don't.

MASON: Do you ever wonder if you're missing out by not having a relationship?

YOU: Not really. I think if I was afraid of missing out, of not getting enough fulfillment in my life, I would be in a romantic relationship right now.

MASON: Would you be happier than you are now?

YOU: I don't know.

MASON: Would you be waiting for God?

YOU: I don't know, but I would guess probably not.

MASON: Unless you found a man who had found God or was waiting for God.

YOU: Yeah.

MASON: That friend who believes in God but isn't a Christian -- you referred to him as a "he". Does he fit the description?

YOU: No, I don't think I could date him.

MASON: Why not?

YOU: I don't know, I just don't feel like it. He's a lot younger than me, so it doesn't feel like that kind of relationship.

MASON: Okay, there's another hill I want to die on. You used "relationship" in a way that it could refer to a romantic or non-romantic relationship. And that's how it should be. But there's this norm of saying that there's nothing but friendship and being in a relationship.

YOU: Okay.

MASON: But actually, friendships are relationships, and talking to strangers, there's a relationship. Family bonds are relationships. It's all relationships.

YOU: I guess a romantic relationship tends to be more serious than the others.

MASON: We certainly take them more seriously. But they all should be taken seriously.

YOU: I don't know, romantic relationships can be pretty crazy.

MASON: There's a different kind of seriousness. All relationships should be

taken that kind of seriously. Romantic relationships should not be taken seriously in the way that they're taken seriously, but they should be taken seriously.

YOU: In your relationship with your girlfriend, do you take things seriously in a good way?

MASON: Sometimes. We try to not be in love with each other, but just to love each other.

YOU: I think even love can be taking someone seriously in a bad way, like if you are an enabler.

MASON: Enabler?

YOU: Someone who rescues other people, enabling them to keep destroying themselves.

MASON: Oh yeah. Well, we're not like that.

YOU: Okay. Does your relationship connect to anything outside itself? Do you two connect to the world outside better because you're together?

MASON: I think so. We're involved at our church a lot.

YOU: Okay.

MASON: Like people should try to make the world better?

YOU: That's one way to try to connect with reality.

A pause.

MASON: I have to get some studying done. But we'll have to talk more.

YOU: Okay.

MASON: Does your friend come here?

YOU: Yeah.

MASON: He sounds interesting.

YOU: Maybe you'll meet him someday.

MASON: My girlfriend would like this place. It's a home-like place.

YOU: Yeah, it's comfortable.

MASON: Okay, I'll get to my work now.

He takes his things over to a different table, sitting such that he is out of sight of you and you are out of sight of him. You sit and finish your tea.

What happened feels entirely at random to you, as though there is no meaning to chance encounters at a cafe. You wonder how he processes this, through his Christian lens. You sit and look out at the cars going by in the night, their headlights turning into taillights.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 18 "Complaint"

Written 7 May 2019

Released 7 May 2023

COMMENTS

(no comments)

Episode 19 - "Giving Up"

You are sitting across from Brian at Mitzi's. You are here, now.

BRIAN: I've been wondering if I should give up writing.

YOU: Writing your book?

BRIAN: Yeah, the book on meaning and God.

YOU: What led to this?

BRIAN: It's not that things are bad. It's actually that things are so good in my life. I don't need anything. I don't see a point in wanting God.

YOU: You're losing your appetite for God?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's what it feels like.

YOU: Well, what else is there?

BRIAN: I don't know of anything.

YOU: Well, some would say, "You'll figure something out."

BRIAN: I don't want to figure anything out.

YOU: Well, we all have to figure things out even if we don't want to. That's what some people would say.

BRIAN: What would you say?

You think about what to say.

YOU: You're younger. You're going through a time in life where you might be becoming more normal. More well-adjusted, healthy, less inclined to set yourself against the people around you.

BRIAN: Yeah. That's what I've been feeling.

YOU: But I'm older. I've been through that. When the dust settles, you might end up like me. I'm not a very heroic person. You're more of a hero. But I still want reality.

BRIAN: Thanks. That helps.

A pause.

BRIAN: How do you do it?

YOU: I don't know.

BRIAN: I guess I don't need to know how. I just need to know that it's possible.

YOU: Sometimes people put a spiritual force into you. They push into you to make you someone new. Someone has to initiate you into their kingdom. So you have to initiate yourself back into your original kingdom, the one you're true to.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So do something decisive.

BRIAN: I think asking you to come here was part of it. You helped re-initiate me, just now.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: I guess this is the benefit of community.

YOU: Community is pretty powerful to do this.

BRIAN: But also just having the right kind of people floating through culture. But if you're trying to long for God, then you want God and God alone, and you have to be apart from the community. So yeah, you have to initiate yourself back.

YOU: Maybe someday there will be a community that respects the longing for God.

BRIAN: Maybe there's already a church somewhere that's like that.

YOU: Maybe.

BRIAN: Does your work make you fake?

YOU: Not really. My work is neutral in itself. I don't have to shake anyone's hand and smile.

BRIAN: Sometimes I wonder if I should get a job.

YOU: It does take your focus off of things like writing, or spiritual feelings. But with some jobs, like mine, you can focus on approaching it however you need to.

BRIAN: You can be present to your work in different ways?

YOU: Yeah. So you can say "I work" differently depending on where you are and where you want to be as a person.

BRIAN: So that way you can be true to what you really believe in.

YOU: But some jobs, maybe that's not so easy to do.

BRIAN: Like being in sales?

YOU: If you're a low-level sales rep, I imagine you can still pretty easily connect to a longing for God. The real danger is when you're a CEO and you're talking up your company, the one that was your idea and that does things that you believe in, but which aren't God.

BRIAN: Do you ever get anything interesting from the things you proofread?

YOU: It's always kind of interesting. While I'm proofreading. But then I tend to forget what I read.

BRIAN: What were you working on today?

YOU: Part of someone's autobiography, and a computer science paper.

BRIAN: What was in the paper?

YOU: It had to do with figuring out if there were duplicate strings in a database.

BRIAN: But you're going to forget that.

YOU: Yeah, that's the trend.

BRIAN: Is there math in it?

YOU: Yeah, and I don't understand it. The person who sent it to me is from China and I guess is pretty confident on the math, or has some other Chinese person who can check that. But the English is up to me.

BRIAN: That's cool. I know there are a lot of academics writing in English who aren't native speakers. They're probably at a disadvantage in getting

published, versus native speakers.

YOU: Yeah, like there could be some kind of service to get them all proofreaders.

BRIAN: That's pretty altruistic. Maybe you could do that.

YOU: I don't have the right kind of personality to set up something like that. I'm more of a follower.

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess there's always that one woman's organization where you can tutor.

YOU: Yeah. Do you have anything to do to reach out to people?

BRIAN: Not really. I mostly focus on my writing.

YOU: That's good. But if you weren't writing, what would you do?

BRIAN: I have no idea. I like finding the roots of things. So maybe that would make me a good life coach? But I don't have the personality to freelance.

YOU: So someone should form a group practice of life coaches.

BRIAN: Absolutely.

YOU: Maybe you could join a church.

BRIAN: Yeah, churches can have little volunteer opportunities in them.

YOU: You could talk to younger people.

BRIAN: Yeah. The thing is, there are two kinds of churches. The churches who care about what their young people are taught, and the ones that don't. I wouldn't want to be a part of the kind that don't care, and I don't think any existing church is in line with my beliefs, and vice versa.

YOU: Speaking of young people, there was a young man who came through, named Mason... did I tell you about him?

BRIAN: No, I don't think so.

YOU: He sounded like a kindred spirit. Like a younger cousin type.

BRIAN: Great, maybe I'll see him.

YOU: Yeah, he might turn up here.

BRIAN: Maybe what I need to do is get my momentum going on my writing again.

YOU: Yeah?

BRIAN: Like that would be how I could reinitiate myself.

YOU: Yeah, that makes sense.

BRIAN: It's like who I am depends on what my past and future are. I can be a different person if my future changes.

YOU: Yeah, that's true. So you have to muster up the strength and then do something, in accordance with your past and future as writer.

BRIAN: And being a writer is a shorthand for my active and passive relationship to the truth.

YOU: So you're deciding to remain in a relationship.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: I guess any long term relationship involves some times where it doesn't seem to make any sense, on any level.

BRIAN: Do you ever work here at the cafe?

YOU: No, not usually. I tried when I first started. It was fun, but too distracting.

BRIAN: I'm the same way with my writing. But the distractions are good.

YOU: Do you have any deadlines?

BRIAN: No, not really.

YOU: Eventually the deadlines get to you and reshape your habits so that you're always doing what's most efficient.

BRIAN: Maybe you could push back against the deadlines and be distracted. It's good to be distracted because then you're not as much in control. You're a pilgrim and a stranger.

YOU: That does sound like a good thing. Maybe there's a way to work distraction into my life intentionally.

BRIAN: But not too intentionally.

YOU: Yeah, I think holiness requires a certain kind of irresponsibility.

BRIAN: But not the wrong kind of irresponsibility.

YOU: No.

BRIAN: Not everyone has the patience to let themselves be irresponsible and suffer the consequences. And then they don't have patience with other people, to let them be irresponsible.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: So, I'm not giving up on my writing, because I'm irresponsible.

YOU: That makes sense.

BRIAN: On the level of, what I said makes sense, or living that out makes sense?

YOU: It makes sense to live that way. As long as you can live that way.

BRIAN: You're right. There are times when you have to swoop in and take control of your life again. Some times cry out for a deus ex machina.

YOU: Yeah, like mom.

BRIAN: Deus ex machinas are underrated.

YOU: Yeah, I can see why they wouldn't be appealing in made-up stories, but in real life, they're amazing.

BRIAN: But people say they're unrealistic.

YOU: Nothing that really comes to pass is unrealistic. But yeah, deus ex machinas can be too few, too far between.

BRIAN: God saves you when you really need it.

YOU: Except when he doesn't.

BRIAN: But he does, when he does. When it comes to pass, it's real.

YOU: Why doesn't God always save us?

BRIAN: Maybe he always does. We just don't know how long the play really is.

YOU: Yeah. I don't know if I'm patient enough to be open to that possibility.

BRIAN: I'm not always that patient.

YOU: But then, I keep living.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So if you're holy by being irresponsible, how does that connect with perfection? Isn't holiness about being perfect?

BRIAN: No, I don't think so. I think holiness is about being true. If you're true to God, then you'll end up in the right place. But if you're perfect, you might not.

YOU: But if you're imperfect, then horrible things happen to you and other people.

BRIAN: That's true.

YOU: So how can you justify being holy?

BRIAN: If you're holy, in the long run, you can actually be perfect. But perfection without holiness is on a false foundation.

YOU: I guess that makes sense. If you're holy, you care about your imperfections, right?

BRIAN: Right.

YOU: But then how can you be irresponsible?

BRIAN: You have to be unaware, or unable to do what you want to do. Or get in situations that are beyond your control. Maybe situations that are too much for you to be aware, new situations.

YOU: Responsibility to the wrong things can be bad.

BRIAN: Responsibility is trying to be true to the world situation, first, rather than God. So you can misunderstand eternity.

YOU: But maybe there is no eternity.

BRIAN: You don't know that.

YOU: I don't.

BRIAN: And also, if you misunderstand the world situation, being completely responsible to that understanding will create temporal problems.

YOU: You can be irresponsible to different things, and that can shape your whole life.

BRIAN: Yeah, like being unable to connect with social cues. There's a freedom in that.

YOU: Absolutely.

BRIAN: So, deadlines. Being responsible to deadlines.

YOU: Yes.

BRIAN: I remember those from college, but college was a while ago.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: And I didn't have my survival on the line. Didn't have to fill my belly by meeting deadlines.

YOU: You would be okay if you couldn't meet your deadlines. God would save you, right?

BRIAN: Yeah, he would. But I don't really believe that in my body.

YOU: No, I guess a lot of people are in your situation.

BRIAN: What's it like having to meet deadlines, to satisfy your body?

YOU: I guess... it connects me to reality. Well, to the world situation. Maybe not to eternity.

BRIAN: Simone Weil said something like that. Work as a way out of solipsism. I guess if you're working, you're really facing reality. You have to keep going until the process is done, and bring your body in conformity with outside reality, or else you starve, and you really do care about not starving.

YOU: Yeah, that's pretty much what it's like.

BRIAN: So everyone except a few people is responsible to this.

YOU: But you're not.

BRIAN: No, not really.

YOU: So you're free. And you're not living in the world with everyone else.

BRIAN: The monks worked on making baskets to sell. But they weren't living in the world with everyone else.

YOU: Maybe they had conquered the desire to fill their stomachs and instead they were working for other reasons.

BRIAN: In a way that sounds right. But they also were big on not being too good to need what everyone needs.

YOU: What's going to happen when we no longer have to work? According to Weil, wouldn't we be stuck in solipsism?

BRIAN: In a sense, yes. Unless there's something else that made things otherwise.

YOU: Huh. But human civilization can't help eliminating work. And if it artificially kept work around, that wouldn't even be the same as really having to work to survive.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: I guess a lot of people don't care about solipsism, though, so they're not going to mind.

BRIAN: I don't know. Yeah, I guess that's true. Maybe Weil was wrong, and we don't need work to avoid solipsism.

YOU: What else could there be? People?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's the obvious way to go. Maybe people are work, and will always be work.

YOU: I don't know, I think people can go through their whole lives without really having to work with people. If people are raised well, there's some work in getting that to happen, but after that, they can be really pleasant. And we can probably get rid of neuroticism with gene therapy, and eliminate anti-social tendencies on the genetic side. Then it's just a matter of time before we can have a perfect culture, on the cultural side, where no one needs to suffer because of other people. And maybe doesn't even have to work that hard to raise kids. The kids would be a little challenge, but not much of a challenge.

BRIAN: Yeah, we could have perfection, of a kind. But would we have holiness?

YOU: Why would anyone want holiness when they can have perfection?

BRIAN: I get pessimistic, that holiness will be forgotten and wiped out by perfection.

YOU: Yeah, and that makes you feel like you should give up on holiness yourself, right?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: But don't give up on it.

BRIAN: Why not?

YOU: Because I said so. I don't need reasons.

BRIAN: You're the irresponsible one.

YOU: We're friends because we're irresponsible.

BRIAN: I guess that's the case with all friends.

YOU: Yes.

You both fall silent, your minds blanking for some reason. You've been sitting in this Mitzi's Cafe (the only one) for so long, talking so long. You've been talking a long time, having one of your long conversations. You decide to get up, and Brian also gets up, and you both go out to the street. There's someone there smoking.

WOMAN: Want a cigarette?

YOU: I don't smoke.

BRIAN: No thanks.

WOMAN: Understandable. You pink-lungs want to live forever.

BRIAN: Do you want to not live forever?

WOMAN: I'm just living the life I started to live a long time ago.

BRIAN: Yeah.

WOMAN: You know what I'm talking about?

BRIAN: I'm not addicted to any substances...

WOMAN: But you're addicted to something. Am I right?

BRIAN: Well...

WOMAN: ...Or am I right? Everybody's an addict. It's a fact.

YOU: Maybe somebody could not be an addict, somehow.

WOMAN: One person. One person in the whole world, one time. Once. Maybe. I wouldn't believe it if I saw it.

BRIAN: But yeah, I got started on something, and I'm still on it.

WOMAN: You're an addict. You have loyalty.

YOU: I don't think that loyalty has to be a form of addiction.

WOMAN: When would it not be?

YOU: Maybe it's like if you're addicted to someone, your eyes bug out...

WOMAN: Yes.

YOU: And your breathing gets faster.

WOMAN: Definitely.

YOU: And you have to have them.

WOMAN: All the time. Totally.

YOU: But if you're loyal to someone, you might think about them as often as someone who's addicted to someone. Maybe more often. But it's lightweight, and you don't have to have them. You're always open to them but you're never clutching them. You're hoping but not trying to make them be with you. It's like an obsession but it's completely different.

WOMAN: Who's the lucky man? Or woman?

You blush.

YOU: This is just something I think about.

WOMAN: Are you a novelist?

YOU: Not really.

WOMAN: If you're telling the truth about just thinking about this, you should be a novelist.

YOU: No.

WOMAN: Okay. So you, what's your name?

BRIAN: Brian.

WOMAN: Brian, okay. So are you loyal to life, or are you addicted?

BRIAN: I'm...

WOMAN: Because then you have a choice, addiction to life, or addiction to cigarettes. And clearly, addiction to cigarettes is better.

BRIAN: I think a lot of times I'm loyal to life.

WOMAN: But you're an addict. Get real. We're all addicts. Nothing but addiction. And a few weird people. One person, *maybe* who is loyal instead of addicted. Hey, you guys can just go back inside now. This is smokers' territory.

Just then two of her friends show up and she gives them cigarettes and they all light up.

WOMAN: You guys are going to get secondhand smoke. It's not safe for you out here. Go back inside, pink-lungs. Drink your beverages in there.

It sounds like more or less good advice to you and Brian, so you take it.

BRIAN: That was real.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: So one thing that is real for me, is how I have to be faithful to my ideas.

YOU: We're talking about the difference between your work and my work?

BRIAN: Yeah. So I don't have any deadlines, anything where I have to push myself to meet the world. But I have the reverse. When an idea comes, I have to entertain it, write it down. That's how reality meets me. And, now that I think about it, that's not solipsistic. But it's different than trying to meet a deadline. It's almost like, when you're not solipsistic, there's more than one being, at least two beings. But with this, it's like there's less than one you, there's more like zero yous.

YOU: There can certainly be an "extinction of personality" when you're

trying to meet a deadline or a customer's demands.

BRIAN: Sometimes I stay up late just to try to get an idea to its conclusion. I don't want to forget anything.

YOU: When I was younger, I would write short stories, and sometimes to get the mood right, if they were stream of consciousness, I would stay up as late as I had to to get them all in the same mood. But then I found that all the short stories got kind of loopy toward the end.

BRIAN: I have more things to say about all this, but I'm getting tired, so I'm forgetting everything.

YOU: You want to give up on this conversation?

BRIAN: No, I guess not. If I did, we wouldn't get to the bottom of it.

YOU: But this way we can keep talking, later.

BRIAN: If we remember.

YOU: You don't think we'll remember?

BRIAN: We might.

YOU: Maybe it'll come up again. It's worth talking about something twice if it's prompted by two different life events.

BRIAN: You may be right.

YOU: It is pretty late.

BRIAN: The monks used to stay up late at night, in prayer.

YOU: How unhealthy of them.

BRIAN: The monks were pretty unhealthy. Not eating either.

YOU: They didn't do drugs, though.

BRIAN: They got mixed up in the spiritual world, though.

YOU: With loyalty, or addiction?

BRIAN: They had to learn loyalty by losing their addictions.

YOU: Actually, not eating can make you live longer.

BRIAN: Yeah, but sometimes it doesn't.

YOU: It really is late.

BRIAN: We're friends, we're irresponsible.

YOU: Is this the good kind of irresponsible?

BRIAN: I don't know.

YOU: Where's Julia tonight?

BRIAN: I don't know. I wonder what she would have said about all this.

YOU: Maybe we'll remember enough to rehearse these points.

BRIAN: We probably won't, though.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: It's been a long night. We talked about a lot of different things.

YOU: Yeah, I should go.

You both get up and go out the door and walk your various ways through a cloud of secondhand smoke.

You are both...

WAITING FOR MARGOT

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...

...

(Episode 19 "Giving Up"

Written 15 May 2019

Released 15 May 2023)

COMMENTS

(no comments)

Episode 20 - "Giving Up, Part 2"

You had a big pile of work today. So big. So deadlined. Brain. So worked. Pile of work. Forced. So done. So over, now. So now you can think a little bit. But your mind is over. You're done. It's over. You think of going to bed. You don't feel like it. You get up and walk around your apartment, pacing, trying

to think of what to do. You decide to make dinner for yourself. But you have too many ingredients. How did this happen? You were enthusiastic yesterday. You were at the grocery store. You had too much. You were alive. You were hungry.

You have a thought that has never occurred to you before. It is unthinkable. You never thought it before, never thought to think it. It wasn't an option, and as long as it wasn't an option, you couldn't act it out. You couldn't even say "no" to it.

You call them on the phone. You don't text them, because you need to hear their voices, arrange things *now*. You need to make dinner because you are hungry and you need to know how many people will eat with you...

YOUR APARTMENT

Your apartment is a simple one. It makes you feel like you are living simply and basically in America. The carpet is dirty, so you get out the vacuum cleaner and clean it. You have a small vacuum cleaner, because your apartment isn't very big. There are posters on the wall of your apartment: a scene with trees and a photograph of a brick which is exactly what it is. You have a piece of art you purchased from a homeless person on the street, a man who was trying to prove the system wrong, a piece of art that looks like thirty minutes after sunset in a driven mind, a man whom you don't remember very well.

The doorbell rings. You open the door. Brian enters.

BRIAN: Hello.

YOU: Hello, welcome in.

BRIAN: Did you just say "well, come in"?

YOU: Yes.

BRIAN: I don't think I've been here before. Have I been here?

YOU: I don't think you have, but I could be wrong.

BRIAN: Do you honestly think I've ever been here?

YOU: No. Do you?

BRIAN: To be honest, no.

YOU: Okay, so I've got the brown rice cooking and I just got done vacuuming the carpet.

BRIAN: Here's the meat.

YOU: OK, you can put it over there.

BRIAN: What next?

YOU: Now it's time for me to cut up the vegetables and the meat.

You begin to open up the package of raw meat.

BRIAN: Do you want me to help?

YOU: Maybe you could cut up the vegetables.

BRIAN: Is Julia coming?

YOU: Yes.

You make small talk and cut things.

DOORBELL: < DING-DONG >

YOU: Brian, can you get the door? My hands are contaminated from the meat.

Brian opens the door. Julia stands at the doorway.

BRIAN: Hey, Julia.

JULIA: Hello.

She steps inside and closes the door behind her.

JULIA: Is there anyone else coming?

YOU: I tried calling Robert but his phone was off.

JULIA: So it's just us with all this food.

YOU: Are you hungry?

JULIA: I am.

YOU: Well, there's a few more minutes before the food is ready.

You're busy stirfrying it.

JULIA: What will we do while we wait?

BRIAN: I don't know.

JULIA: Maybe we could dance.

BRIAN: I don't know how to dance.

JULIA: That's right, you don't have a body. You're just stuck in this physical world.

BRIAN: I have a body that isn't very coordinated that's stuck in this physical world.

JULIA: Deep down inside you, do you have a body?

BRIAN: My heart would prefer that I not have a body.

JULIA: So you, the real you, doesn't have a body. You don't have a body in your heart.

BRIAN: Look, I think I can dance if there's something that works for me.

JULIA: Ballroom dancing?

BRIAN: No, no ballroom dancing for me.

JULIA: Okay, what about the ones that make your head work?

BRIAN: Like line dancing?

JULIA: Yeah.

BRIAN: Way too smart for me. I don't think in time that way.

JULIA: Is there any dance that you've connected with in the past?

BRIAN: The dance of conversation.

YOU: Brian, weren't you telling me about that Cambodian dance you saw once?

BRIAN: Oh yeah, I was at a Cambodian festival and watched these women doing a really slow, spooky dance.

JULIA: Spooky like Halloween?

BRIAN: No, a different kind of spooky. There was some kind of hidden meaning behind their movements, but I know what it was, but I can't put it into words.

JULIA: How did the dance go?

BRIAN: I remember that they moved their hands really slowly and specifically.

JULIA: Like this?

BRIAN: You are definitely moving your hands really slowly and specifically but it wasn't like that.

JULIA: Can you show me?

BRIAN: Well, as best as I remember, it went like this.

He tries, and Julia starts to move to mimic him. Then they mirror each other.

JULIA: Huh, this is dancing with a partner but without touching.

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess that works for me.

JULIA: You disembodied troll.

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: You monk.

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: What kind of dancing would monks do?

BRIAN: Maybe like this.

JULIA: I think we should stare into each other's eyes.

BRIAN: To be monk-like?

JULIA: Yes, because monks stare into the abyss.

BRIAN: That's very true.

They try but soon crack up from the seriousness.

JULIA: Okay, we have to try again.

They do better this time.

BRIAN: I think this dance teaches us how to focus and be serious and also to crack up when we're staring at the abyss.

JULIA: So it's good for us whether we succeed or not.

BRIAN: Failure is still failure but it's also success.

They keep trying.

YOU: Hey, would you like to hear some abyss music while you do that?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: Okay.

You have served the food but the dancers haven't been paying attention. The food will be warm when they're ready. You put in a CD you got from the library. It's synthesizer music, open voicing, doesn't change, lots of stark single notes droning. It sounds like a 1980s abyss. You don't like it too much, you like it, it's nice but you don't want to go to that place, it's well-done and artistic but this is the second time you've played it since you checked it out ten days ago.

They dance and then they see the food on the table, and you turn off the music.

You come together at the table and serve your plates.

JULIA: Brian, do you say grace?

BRIAN: Normally I don't.

YOU: Do you want to?

BRIAN: Maybe. Does it have to be ecumenical?

JULIA: What do you mean by that?

BRIAN: Do I have to make it something that includes an atheist and a... whatever you are... ?

JULIA: I don't mind. Just believe what you believe and say what you say, and then I'll say thanks the way I want to. Beth can close, since she's the host.

BRIAN: Okay.

God, thank you for this food, which will taste exactly the way it tastes. Thank you for company. You will guide what we say. Open us to hear you in everything you already say.

JULIA: Okay... hm... okay.

I am thankful for the Universe which causes everything and lets us make all of our decisions. If the Universe can hear or feel, then I send it my gratitude and it can send positive energies back to where we are so that we are healthy and wise.

YOU: I approve of the sentiments of my friends although I don't believe what they believe. Okay, now we eat.

You all are hungry and don't talk much while you eat. Your food is okay. The ingredients are the stars of the show.

JULIA: How was your day, Beth? You look out of it.

YOU: I was working a lot, and my brain wasn't at its peak. Brain fog. Brain-ness. Words. I'm babbling.

JULIA: But you met your deadlines?

YOU: Yes.

BRIAN: You made it.

YOU: Yes.

BRIAN: But you could have quit.

YOU: I could have. Maybe I could have gotten an extension on one of the things I was working on. But that would have been complicated and I don't like doing that to my clients.

BRIAN: This reminds me about what we were talking about the other day, about giving up.

JULIA: I missed this.

BRIAN: The main thing I remember was about the difference between addiction and loyalty. If you "never give something up", it could be because you are addicted, or it could be because you're loyal.

JULIA: Huh.

BRIAN: Maybe you'll have more thoughts as we go along.

JULIA: No, it makes sense. Are we addicted to living, or are we loyal to it?

BRIAN: I think we talked about that.

JULIA: I think there are times where you can't even be addicted or loyal, you can't distinguish between the two.

BRIAN: Is that because you can't see the difference, or because there is no difference?

JULIA: Same thing. You can't see the difference and there is no difference, because you don't have any words. You're just, there, in the moment.

BRIAN: One step at a time.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: When I was younger, I used to run regularly. Sometimes, I would

lose track of myself as I was running. I would give up, but my body would keep going, would carry me through. Is that addiction, or loyalty, or is it what Julia's talking about?

BRIAN: I think maybe it's what Julia's talking about.

JULIA: It sounds right.

BRIAN: One thing with loyalty is that you can't feel sorry for yourself.

JULIA: If you don't get what you want?

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: So you can't feel sorry for yourself and hope at the same time.

BRIAN: Yeah, that sounds right.

JULIA: Is it ever good to feel sorry for yourself? How does that help?

YOU: Maybe it helps you feel sorry for other people.

JULIA: I guess some people like that.

YOU: People like feeling like they're loved.

BRIAN: And that they're liked. A lot of trouble comes from that, wanting to be loved and wanting to be liked.

YOU: It's good to be loved.

BRIAN: Yeah. If it's real. But being felt sorry for is just having a signal sent. It doesn't necessarily mean anything.

YOU: But for people who get something out of the signal itself, it does mean something in itself.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: But I understand what you're saying. Is there something other than feelings which people can have, which is love?

BRIAN: Yes. Definitely.

JULIA: Can you explain?

BRIAN: No.

JULIA: Yeah, same here.

YOU: It's a gift to be simple. That's how you avoid sentimentality.

JULIA: Yeah. Wait, how does that relate?

YOU: Sentimentality about your feelings. If you're sentimental about your

feelings, it makes you fearful. And you feel sorry for yourself when you don't get things. You can have feelings, but you don't have to be sentimental about your feelings.

BRIAN: If you're sentimental about your feelings, then you don't do your best job in helping other people with their real feelings. There's all the people who don't have anything extra, and you can't help them, because your feelings are too precious to you.

YOU: How can people lose their sentimentality to their feelings?

BRIAN: I don't know.

JULIA: The only way I know is to be broken down.

YOU: So we have to break other people down? Or do we break ourselves down?

BRIAN: Maybe if you're addicted to something, or loyal to something, you get broken down.

YOU: Addiction gives being broken-down a bad name.

BRIAN: Yeah, so it's better to be loyal. Desperately loyal. So if you acquire an addiction or a loyalty, then over time you can be broken down.

YOU: But if you're sentimental about your feelings, you're not even going to start.

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: So how can society change?

BRIAN: Well, maybe there's some step that gets people to be interested in loyalty.

JULIA: What would that be?

BRIAN: I'm not sure.

JULIA: Maybe you'll think of it.

BRIAN: Maybe I'll remember it. It does seem to be the kind of thing I would have been thinking of.

Your meals are weighing on your brains and your apartment is too small. You three go outside for a walk. For some reason, Hoheres Wesen is kind tonight. There's a breeze coming off the Ocean of Soothing, and you walk around in the fading light of the evening. You walk over to the park near your house. You don't see any drug dealers tonight, and you give a dollar to a homeless person who is doing well enough to

smile. You see kids playing with glow in the dark Frisbees, and you stop to drink some water from the drinking fountain. You three sit on the grass, the grass that doesn't have any trash on it -- no trash in sight tonight. Julia crosses her legs and Brian stiffly tries. You sit on one foot, with the other leg upright so that your knee is next to your shoulder. A glow in the dark Frisbee lands next to you and a kid comes by and gets it.

YOU: So what should we talk about now?

BRIAN: I don't know.

YOU: Maybe there's nothing to talk about.

JULIA: Look at the sky.

BRIAN: That sky takes me places.

JULIA: Where?

BRIAN: I don't know. Somewhere like in a dream. But not into a dream itself.

YOU: I get that way when I look at certain paintings.

BRIAN: I think there's another world somewhere, which we just get a taste of when we look at the sky.

JULIA: Heaven?

BRIAN: No, I wouldn't call it heaven. I think it's eternal, like heaven, but it's not for the people who like heaven. They can be in that place, but this is a different place.

JULIA: What are the people who like heaven into?

BRIAN: They like stories and wrestling and engagement. Life as a story or a game. But the other eternity is for people who are done with stories and wrestling and engagement.

YOU: People who are furthest from sentimentality.

BRIAN: Yes.

JULIA: Is there love there?

BRIAN: Yes, the love of God.

JULIA: What about the love of people?

BRIAN: In that eternity we love God with all of our hearts and we love our

neighbors as ourselves.

JULIA: Unsentimentally?

BRIAN: Yes. If you are full of God, you understand what it's like to be the person next to you who is also full of God. You just wave hello to them.

A pause.

BRIAN: Have either of you thought about having kids?

JULIA: That's a personal question...

BRIAN: I don't mean "Have you thought about doing it yourself", but more "Have you imagined what it would be like to have kids?"

JULIA: Don't worry, I don't really care about personal questions, I was just messing with you.

BRIAN: Oh okay, well, *you* shouldn't worry about messing with me, because I don't mind.

YOU: I think there would be a lot of times when it would be painful. A lot of times where you had to go against how you felt in the moment to do something for them.

BRIAN: I don't think I have enough in me to do that.

YOU: You may be right. I might not have enough in me to do that. But then something else has to do that at some point.

BRIAN: I guess being a parent would be a case of "desperate loyalty" sometimes.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: Maybe that's the thing other than feelings which is love. Loyalty.

YOU: Yeah, that makes sense.

JULIA: What is loyalty? Is it a way that you act?

BRIAN: It's a stance. When you stand a certain way, that's a way that you act which you feel in your muscles, like proprioception. And that stance naturally connects to action. The muscles and the feeling are one.

JULIA: And you and your environment flow into each other. You and the situation.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So what about feeling sorry for someone?

BRIAN: Feeling compassion for someone or feeling sorry for someone are stances, too, but they're different from loyalty. There can be despair in them.

YOU: What about compassion and loyalty together?

BRIAN: That could be good.

YOU: Maybe that's what you need, to love people who need to feel like people feel like they love them.

BRIAN: Maybe.

JULIA: Loyalty doesn't betray. Feeling sorry for people can betray.

BRIAN: Can compassion betray?

JULIA: No, I don't think so, but maybe that's by definition.

BRIAN: So when people feel a certain kind of feeling of care and sympathy for someone, it could turn out to be compassion or it could turn out to be feeling sorry for people, depending on whether they betrayed them?

YOU: They are different stances.

JULIA: So you know when you're compassionate, you know the way that it flows.

BRIAN: But you might not be aware of how you're not connecting to reality properly and end up betraying people when you think you're being compassionate.

YOU: It's getting dark, we should head back.

So you all stand up off the ground and go back to your apartment.

YOU: Brian, do you feel like giving up on your book today?

BRIAN: No, I think I can finish it. I think I can keep going for a long time afterward.

YOU: But you're at a place in life where things can change.

BRIAN: That's true, but I think I can still see myself in the future, working on this stuff.

YOU: You can see the future so you know you will be there someday.

BRIAN: The future already exists and I'm already in it.

YOU: You're not saying that egotistically.

BRIAN: No.

YOU: But people might think you were.

BRIAN: Yeah, I'd better keep that to myself.

YOU: I'm not sure you really will connect with that distant future. But what do I know? You know yourself better than I do, and maybe my worldview is wrong and yours is right. I don't honestly think that, but part of me can see the possibility.

BRIAN: Thank you.

JULIA: When is your book going to be done?

BRIAN: I don't know. Maybe in a month.

JULIA: Are you going to read it to us?

BRIAN: It's a dialogue, so I think we should all read it.

JULIA: Here?

BRIAN: At Mitzi's. Better atmosphere for it, I think.

YOU: Why is that?

BRIAN: I want it to flow out into a space with other people in it, instead of being kept inside a private space where the world is small. Even if nobody else in the cafe pays attention.

YOU: Okay, we'll have to prepare our minds for that.

JULIA: Strengthen our voices.

BRIAN: Yes. Thanks.

YOU: Okay, I'm getting kind of sleepy. I think you two had better go home.

BRIAN: Okay.

JULIA: Okay, good night.

They exit.

You clean up the dishes from dinner and straighten up a little.
Then you get ready for bed and lie down, strangely
exhausted. What a day.

But you can't sleep until you find yourself in a dream,
standing beneath palm trees on the coast during a hurricane,
getting behind the trunks so that the water doesn't get in your
eyes. You run into the culvert where it's not raining and

there's a little girl whom you pick up and carry over your shoulder to the end of the culvert. There's a grate and you start to worry that the water coming down the culvert will rise and rise and you'll be trapped.

And you wake up in a panic and gradually realize that it was only a dream.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 20 "Giving Up, Part 2"

Written 17 May 2019

Released 17 May 2023

COMMENTS

(no comments)

CONCLUSION

Episode 21 - "Farewell"

You think about a story idea... there's a man who lives his whole life looking for the answer... but you don't know how to finish the story... but you think about how we're all trying to look for some kind of answer. Maybe "looking for an answer" is the foundation of narrative. We're looking for some kind of meaning which connects to a deep question inside of us. There's something we want to hear.

You think of this as you sit at the little table which serves as "kitchen" table in your little apartment that doesn't really have a kitchen, while you eat a kiwifruit and some peanuts that came in their shells. You're having an afternoon snack, on the weekend. Thinking about this, you wonder if your friends might be at Mitzi's. Yes, you need to go to Mitzi's to see if you can talk to them.

So you go there.

MITZI'S CAFE

Exactly the way you remember it, except there are different people inside.

You open the door and enter.

You get your drink and find that both Julia and Brian are already here, playing a game of Scrabble.

YOU: Hey.

BRIAN: Hey, Beth.

JULIA: Hey, look at what I played.

The word "uxorious".

YOU: Where did you learn that word? Were you in a spelling bee in a

previous life?

JULIA: No, but I had been a kid in a small town in the 1960s and all I had was an encyclopedia set and dictionaries to pass the time, so I read a lot of random words.

YOU: Okay, what does it mean?

JULIA: I don't know. Brian?

BRIAN: I don't know, either.

YOU: So we don't know if we're having a uxorious day or not.

JULIA: No.

BRIAN: No.

YOU: How is the game going?

JULIA: We're losing interest.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: Maybe we should have a spelling bee instead.

JULIA: No, I think we're just running out of interest in playing games.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: It's one of those afternoons?

JULIA: We were playing Jenga before.

YOU: Okay, so you've had your fill.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So other than getting this green tea, the reason I came here was to talk about writing.

BRIAN: Anything in particular?

YOU: I was trying to write a story. All I have so far is that I know it has to be about a man who lives his whole life trying to find the answer. Whatever "the answer" could mean. I think "the answer" could be, just looking for the meaning which speaks to a question in us, some way we want to be meant to. So it's what we're always looking for.

BRIAN: Right, that sounds right.

JULIA: So what happens next in your story?

YOU: I don't know. That's all I know.

BRIAN: Yeah, I think that's every story. So it makes it hard to think of anything. Do you know anything about the man?

YOU: No.

JULIA: Could it actually be a woman?

YOU: Maybe, but I think it's really a man. I mean, that's what I thought it was at first.

JULIA: It's a man.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: Huh...

A pause.

YOU: Well, I guess we're all stumped. Anything you guys want to tell me?

BRIAN: Yeah. I had an interesting experience while trying to write my book. I was trying to get work done but it got harder and harder. And it's still hard. But now I feel like I can do it. I broke through something and I know I can keep going, although it will be harder from now on.

JULIA: Is it painful?

BRIAN: Yeah, it's kind of painful.

YOU: But you keep going.

BRIAN: Yeah, it's my grace to keep going. All these years, I enjoyed work, the process. I still enjoy it, but it's not pure joy. Now it's joy mixed with pain. But not the worst kind of pain.

JULIA: So this is how things are for now.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's all I can ever see.

JULIA: That's true. What's here is all there is, until it is not.

BRIAN: So now, instead of having to give up, I can keep going, for a long time.

YOU: Why didn't you give up?

BRIAN: I guess I've gotten used to keeping-going. And one thing I remember right now, too, is the story of Raïssa Maritain. She was Jacques Maritain's wife, and she led him in some ways. She got into experiencing the presence of God. And at first it was glorious. But for more than ten years, it was painful. But she kept doing it because what's love if you don't suffer for it sometimes?

JULIA: That's how I feel about life.

BRIAN: You must really love life.

YOU: What does the pain feel like?

BRIAN: It's not very strong but enough that I feel it. I feel like I'm forcing myself to do something, kind of unnatural. I can feel it in my gut and in my brain, kind of a locking up.

JULIA: Brian, you should never force yourself to do something.

YOU: Are you being sarcastic, Julia?

JULIA: I don't know. I don't know why I said that. I was just saying words. I will say that if people forced themselves to do unnatural things in certain circumstances, the world would be a better place.

BRIAN: Yeah, but I think you need to do the thing that really suits you.

YOU: But you're keeping-going.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: How about you, Julia, any news?

JULIA: Yeah... I've had a lot of trouble finding my first dates. So I'm thinking I have to change my lifestyle a little bit.

BRIAN: You're giving us bad news.

JULIA: Yeah, it's bad news. I'm going to have to hang out with some of my other friends more, see if my man can be accessed through them. So I won't be with you all for a while.

BRIAN: I guess this is the answer you're looking for.

JULIA: Yeah. I'm also looking for the answer to why this is the answer I'm looking for.

BRIAN: Beth, maybe this is the story you can write.

YOU: I can't. I can't make Julia into a man.

JULIA: That has never happened to me in all my transformations.

BRIAN: So how long will your separation last?

JULIA: I don't know. As long as it takes, I guess. But I'll be around sometimes. Just not very often.

YOU: Julia, this is too bad. But you have to do what you have to do.

JULIA: Maybe I could try feeling bad all the time, like Brian.

YOU: Is that how your story is supposed to go?

JULIA: No, you're right. It is what it is. For now.

BRIAN: And then you're going to die.

JULIA: Yeah...

YOU: I think sometimes, you don't understand a person's life until they die.

JULIA: I never understand my phases until I'm done with them.

BRIAN: It's like you can't know. If you understood, for real, you would change. And then you wouldn't be yourself anymore.

JULIA: Yeah, so maybe we can never really know ourselves and be ourselves at the same time. Like Heisenberg ["high zen burg"].

BRIAN: So... what if we were answers? We're spending our lives looking for the answer, and maybe sometimes we're the answer. But we can never get ourselves. We can never get our own selves as answers to any of our questions.

JULIA: And we never know ourselves until the day we die.

BRIAN: Maybe not even then. But we had the answer the whole time. It wasn't up to us to understand the answer, but just to have it.

YOU: That would be an interesting thing to do with my story.

BRIAN: Yeah, it would be.

YOU: But then, maybe it's too universal to help me too much. Maybe everyone is that way.

BRIAN: Not everyone is that way. Some people aren't looking hard for an answer. They don't make it to become an answer.

JULIA: Do they go to hell?

BRIAN: I don't know, maybe some of them.

JULIA: I'm going to miss your theisticness, Brian.

BRIAN: I'll miss you, too. What are these friends of yours?

JULIA: They're friends.

BRIAN: Are they safe?

JULIA: They're okay.

BRIAN: Do they do drugs?

JULIA: No.

BRIAN: Do they steal things?

JULIA: No.

BRIAN: Commit other crimes?

JULIA: Are you worried about me, Brian?

BRIAN: No. Definitely not. You'll be fine.

JULIA: Thank you. I think what you're really worried about is whether I'm going to drift away from you. From your truth.

YOU: Isn't it your truth, too, Julia?

JULIA: Yes, a lot of it is my truth.

YOU: Do you think you'll be able to stay true to your truth, to the parts that you share with us, when you're far away?

JULIA: I think I will be able to.

BRIAN: But it will be hard. You'll have to be in pain and be unnatural.

JULIA: If you want one part of your life to be natural, another part has to be unnatural. You just have to choose.

BRIAN: Yeah.

Joe the barista comes by.

JOE: Hey fellow human beings. We had a mishap in our cookie-baking process and we have some complimentary burnt cookies. Are you guys interested?

YOU: How burnt are they?

JOE: Take a look.

He produces some cookies.

BRIAN: Wow, that's pretty burnt. I don't know about that.

JOE: Okay, suit yourself. But remember, there's no "I" in "complimentary".

BRIAN: There is. It's spelled c-o-m-p-l-i-m-e-n-t-a-r-y.

JOE: But is that an uppercase I?

BRIAN: You're right, it's not.

JOE: How about it? Burnt cookie from our award-winning bakery department. This opportunity isn't ever going to come your way again, I assure you.

BRIAN: It's tempting, but I'll pass.

JOE: Either of you?

JULIA: No.

YOU: No thanks.

JOE: Okay. Well, I guess I'll have to eat them myself.

Joe walks away, munching on a cookie.

YOU: So in the story... Wait, if I write a story about a man who's looking for the answer... I still don't know what kind of story to write.

BRIAN: Maybe you could do something autobiographical. What's the answer you're looking for in your own life?

YOU: You mean, what's my question?

BRIAN: What's your question?

YOU: I don't know. I don't really know.

BRIAN: Are you looking for forgiveness?

YOU: No, I don't think so.

BRIAN: Are you looking for reality?

YOU: No.

BRIAN: Are you sure?

YOU: Maybe sometimes I am. I don't know. I don't know if that's what my question really is.

BRIAN: Maybe if you're passionate but you don't know, it's because you want reality.

YOU: I'm not sure if I'm passionate. Do I have to be passionate?

BRIAN: Some people operate in a quiet register. Did you take math in college?

YOU: No. I was pretty sure I was going to be a writer. I only took one class when I was a freshman.

BRIAN: Somewhere in college math there's the idea of parameterizing. When you parameterize, you take one variable and substitute it for other variables. One variable drives two or more other variables. So let's say you're looking at the equation of a ball moving forward and bouncing at the same time. There's something that makes the ball move forward, and

something that makes it move up and down. If you want, you can express things in terms of the relationship between the ball moving forward and the ball moving up and down.

YOU: That's like $y = mx + b$.

BRIAN: Right. But you can also express things in terms of, there's something which moves the ball forward, like the inertia it has after someone threw it, and there's something that moves it up and down, which is the initial potential energy turning into kinetic energy through gravity and then experiencing the normal force when it hits the ground and it goes up again. These two components are each a function of, as though driven by, time. So you can turn the $y = mx + b$ type equation into something like $y = t$ and $t / m = x$ -- something like that. Don't quote me on how to do a parameterization. But it's just a case where an underlying reality drives two more apparent realities.

YOU: So how does that relate?

BRIAN: Your passion plugs into other equations, but they're not necessarily loud equations. A person can have a big passion and it comes out quiet.

YOU: But my passion is quiet on the inside.

BRIAN: Maybe you aren't passionate then.

YOU: I think I might be a little bit passionate.

BRIAN: People don't always know when they're passionate.

YOU: I'm old enough to know who I am by now.

BRIAN: Do you know who you are?

YOU: No. But I don't feel passionate.

BRIAN: Maybe you still have a question, though. But you aren't asking it very hard.

YOU: That could be.

JULIA: Maybe your question is "who am I?"

YOU: Yeah, maybe it is. Maybe my question is "what is my question?" Yeah. I think that's what it is.

BRIAN: Are you sure?

YOU: Brian, don't mess with me. I just figured out that my question is "what is my question" and then you undermined me. Don't do that.

BRIAN: I'm sorry.

YOU: Are you going to be different in the future?

BRIAN: I don't think so, but I don't think this kind of thing will happen very often.

YOU: You're right. This doesn't happen very often. Okay, I'll just forget this happened in a few days. Consider yourself forgiven. But don't do it again. But yeah, I'm not really sure that that's my question.

BRIAN: But that's what you would say if it was your question.

YOU: But I might say it if something else was my question.

BRIAN: Like what?

YOU: Anything else. Any other question, maybe I wouldn't be aware of it.

BRIAN: So you have to find that other question.

YOU: But I don't know how.

BRIAN: So it's like when I'm waiting for God.

YOU: I'm waiting for something but I can't make it come. It just comes when it comes. That's the nature of things.

BRIAN: So when you wait for God, that's what you're waiting for?

YOU: I think it's for that, and maybe for God, too.

BRIAN: You're waiting for something.

YOU: Yeah. That's a fact.

BRIAN: What is it like for you to wait?

YOU: I don't think about it most of the time. I just do my routine.

BRIAN: So are you really waiting?

YOU: I think in a way I am, and in a way I'm not. You were telling me about Simone Weil one time, about how in French "waiting" is the same word as "attention" or something like that. So that's a different kind of waiting than what I normally do.

BRIAN: She would probably say that you have to go through your routine as though you were waiting on God.

YOU: Yeah. She was an intense person.

BRIAN: Are you tired?

YOU: I'm tired tonight. But I'm happy because maybe I'm a little closer to figuring out my story with the man. Or maybe I'll forget about the story like I forget about everything.

JULIA: It's okay, Beth. You'll do okay without me.

YOU: Thanks. How do you know?

JULIA: I have an intuition.

BRIAN: Is that really knowledge?

JULIA: Yes. Everything you know is founded in intuition. You said so yourself.

BRIAN: You're right.

JULIA: Beth is going to be just fine. I'm the one who has problems.

YOU: No, you'll be fine.

JULIA: If I'm fine, then you're the one who can have problems. Only one of us can have problems.

YOU: Okay, you can have the problems, I guess.

JULIA: Thank you.

You all lapse into silence and then Julia and Brian resume their game of Scrabble. You get up and walk around the cafe, and see a man working on his laptop. You don't want to talk to him, so you keep walking around. Then you come back to the table.

JULIA: You don't want to be here but you don't know where to go.

YOU: I guess I'm having a weird afternoon.

JULIA: Maybe "uxorious" is just another word for "weird".

YOU: You can replace every adjective you don't understand with "weird".

BRIAN: We're getting into Mad Libs territory here.

JULIA: You guys are both writers. I bet you got a big kick out of Mad Libs when you were younger.

BRIAN: I did.

YOU: Yeah, they were pretty funny. I used to play them with my cousins. They liked them a lot. But I never had them at my house.

BRIAN: Did you wish you had them?

YOU: No, it was fine not having them. I forgot about them. And then I remembered them again when I was at my cousins' house.

JULIA: Did you like poetry?

YOU: Yeah, I did.

JULIA: I haven't read a poem in years.

YOU: You should write poetry. You don't need to read it if you don't want to.

JULIA: Why would I want to write poetry?

YOU: You could express yourself that way.

JULIA: You don't like the ways I normally express myself?

You laugh with her.

JULIA: Just kidding. I'm going to miss you guys but first for a while I'll anti-miss you guys.

BRIAN: After this long afternoon, maybe I'm starting to anti-miss you guys.

JULIA: Okay, we should say our until-laters then.

YOU: Do you want to walk up and down Washington Avenue with me, Julia?

JULIA: Okay.

You leave Brian to the Scrabble board, which he's putting away. Out on Washington Ave., a fine dry warm breeze is blowing, but not a Santa Ana.

JULIA: Well, you've got a question, and I've got a question.

YOU: I don't think I really have a question.

JULIA: You have a question.

YOU: Maybe I do. I'm not completely happy.

JULIA: You're vague.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: Well, I'm incomplete. Every day without my man, is like when Brian tries to write things.

YOU: It's hard being single.

JULIA: Are you thinking of going out with Robert?

YOU: I think about it.

JULIA: But you don't do anything.

YOU: No.

JULIA: Is that okay?

YOU: Yeah, I think it's okay.

JULIA: But you're not happy about something else.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: Okay, well, maybe it's okay to not be happy.

YOU: I don't think it is. I think it's okay to be unhappy if you're on the right track. And if you're not, being unhappy gets you on the right track. And you wouldn't get on the right track if it was too okay.

JULIA: Do you think I'm doing the right thing by searching for first dates out there through my other friends?

YOU: Maybe it's not the right question.

JULIA: Yeah, but it's always on my mind.

YOU: I've figured things out, finally got what I wanted, and I barely remembered that I wanted it, and I had all-new problems.

JULIA: Yeah. But I'm tired. And I just want to settle down.

YOU: You want to get old? You're still young.

JULIA: I just want to get old, and *comfortable*.

YOU: Maybe you want something else.

JULIA: Yeah. Maybe when I get my needs taken care of.

YOU: Okay.

JULIA: Yeah, I remember that waiting for God thing. You know what I'm talking about.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: But I have to live my life now.

YOU: You have to do what you have to do.

JULIA: Look at this shop window. Look what they did with the display.

You inspect the display with her. It's tastefully done, and you see how it works as she explains how each piece of it works together to bring about its tastefulness.

You walk in silence. It's nice to be with her, walking down the

street. And then you make it back to your apartment.

JULIA: Oh, we should go back to my car.

YOU: Do you want some food?

JULIA: Sure.

You enter your apartment and have some leftovers.

JULIA: I feel like I'm going on a long trip on an airplane.

YOU: You're going to be gone for a year?

JULIA: Yeah. But I'm not going anywhere. And I'll be back sometimes.

YOU: So it's not that big a deal.

JULIA: No, it's not that big a deal.

You finish your food.

JULIA: I like your art. Maybe I can make some art for your wall while I'm "gone".

YOU: I bet you're a good artist.

JULIA: I have really good images but I'm not trained.

YOU: Yeah, that's a good look for my wall.

JULIA: Okay.

YOU: Let's go?

You go out the door, and make your way back to her car. She gets in the car and starts it and goes.

It's getting a little less bright, the sun is sailing, floating, flying, sitting its way toward its visible decline. You walk back to your apartment and enter and close the door, and say goodbye to the outside world.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 21 "Farewell"

Written 18 May 2019

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COMMENTS

1. This is the last episode of season one of *Waiting for Margot*. In 2019 I had some intentions of continuing, and in principle, I have not ruled out going on, but I think it is best to think of this as a completed work.